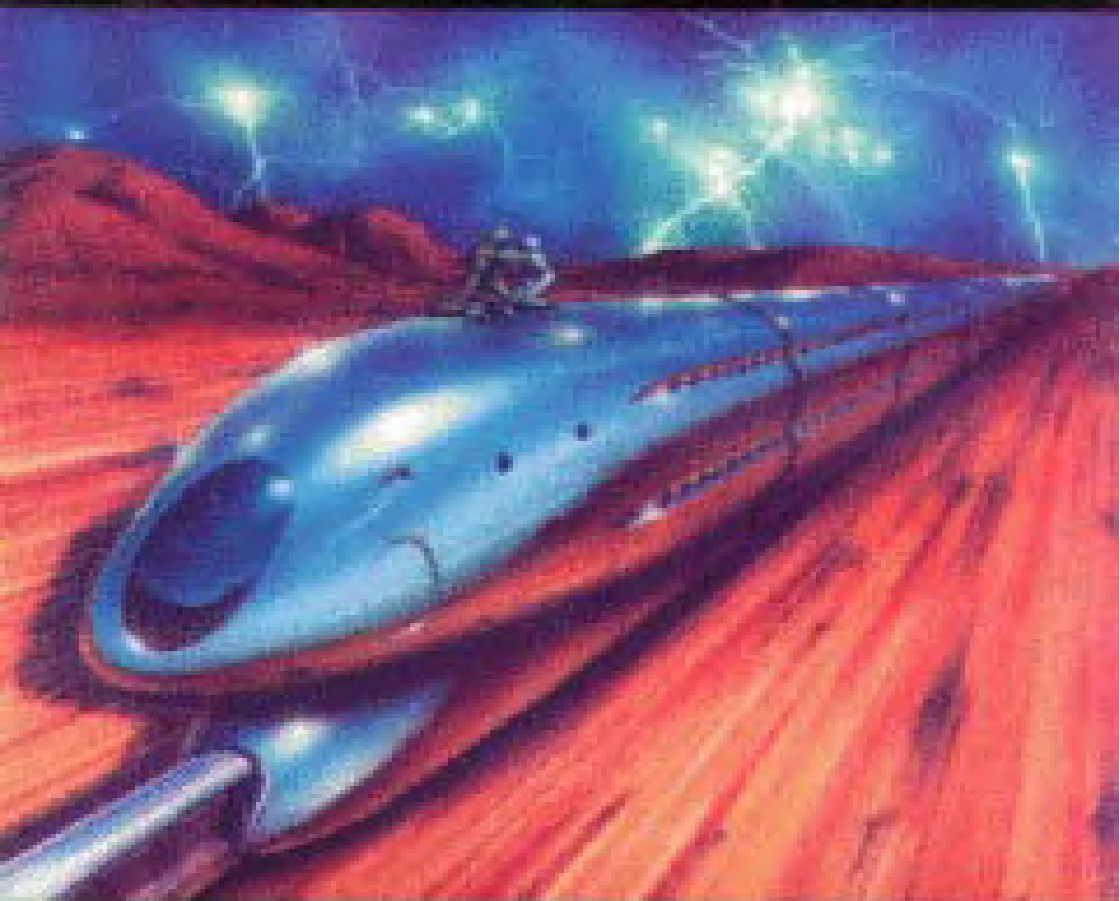


T H E N E W  
A D V E N T U R E S



TEMPEST

CHRISTOPHER BULIS

# TEMPEST

**SMITH CONSULTED HIS WATCH VERY DELIBERATELY. 'YOU HAVE ONE HOUR TO FIND THE IMMULATE AND HAND IT OVER TO ME. IF YOU DO NOT, I WILL TEAR THIS TRAIN AND ITS PASSENGERS APART PIECE BY PIECE!'**

Tempest: a wild and untamed world perpetually wreathed in cloud and storms.

The only means of long-distance travel across its surface are the great transcontinental monorails that traverse its lonely and dangerous wastelands. Returning home from a lucrative lecture, Professor Bemice Summerfield finds herself on the most celebrated of these mighty trains.

The Drell Immulate: a fabulous and unique religious idol. Precious enough to kill for. So important to those rival factions who follow the way of its maker that they will dare anything to ensure its return.

Isolated in the wilderness and far from civilisation, death strikes the luxurious Polar Express, and a routine journey turns into a nightmare. But can Bernice save a train on the brink of disaster?

**T H E   N E W**  
**A D V E N T U R E S**

**CHRISTOPHER BULIS** is a popular and respected writer of science fiction.

Cover design: Slatter-Anderson

Cover painting: Peter Elson

The New Adventures is an imprint of  
Virgin Publishing Ltd.

**UK: £4.99 USA: \$5.95 CANADA: \$8.99**

**\*AUSTRALIA: \$10.95**

**\*RECOMMENDED PRICE**

**Science fiction**

**ISBN 0 426 20523 5**



# NA

## TEMPEST

*Slowly Benny became aware of the noise that had woken her. The train was running smoothly, but there were raised and excited voices in the corridor outside, interspersed with the sound of running feet.*

*Muttering darkly, she hauled herself out of the tangle of bedclothes, put on her robe, after some difficulty in finding the armholes, and opened the door. The corridor was full of confused figures, some dressed, others still in night clothes.*

*‘What the hell’s going on?’ she demanded, rubbing her eyes.*

*Nobody took any notice. She grabbed hold of the nearest convenient arm, which belonged to a man who she vaguely recalled from the night before as Terbery. He was as white as a sheet.*

*‘What’s happening?’ she asked again, raising her voice above the commotion.*

*‘Murder,’ he said simply. ‘There’s been a murder... and the Drell Imnulate’s missing!’*

T H E   N E W  

---

A D V E N T U R E S

TEMPEST  
Christopher Bulis

**NA**

First published in Great Britain in 1998 by  
Virgin Publishing Ltd  
332 Ladbroke Grove  
London W10 5AH

Copyright © Christopher Bulis 1998

The right of Christopher Bulis to be identified as the Author of this Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Bernice Summerfield originally created by Paul Cornell

Cover illustration by Peter Elson

ISBN 0 426 20523 5

Typeset by Galleon Typesetting, Ipswich  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Mackays of Chatham PLC

*All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior written consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

## PROLOGUE

‘My friends, followers in the Way of Drell, I bring you the most wonderful news!’

The red-robed priest’s words caused a stir of surprise to run through the thirty-odd figures who crowded the chamber.

‘We have received word, quite unofficially, about the First Imnulate; that which was shaped by Drell’s own hands. After so many years the opportunity has finally come to restore it to its rightful place!’

There were gasps of delight from the congregation, and several cries of: ‘Drell be praised! Drell be praised!’

The tapestry-hung chamber walls were ringed with pedestals on which sat statues representing life forms of all shapes and sizes. The life-spirit Drell had identified was universal and could inhabit any form or none, therefore his followers believed all must be equally revered as its temporary vessels. But the single pedestal behind the altar was empty, as it was in every Drell Temple in the galaxy. It echoed the same empty space on a far grander pedestal in the Mother Temple on Karnor, where three thousand years before a humble philosopher/priest had first formulated his teachings.

‘More than this,’ the priest continued, after the excited cries had diminished, ‘two members of our very own flock have been chosen to play a part in the Imnulate’s return. I shall explain who and how in a moment. But please remember; no word of this must pass beyond these walls. Though it pains us to practise such secrecy, this information cannot be allowed to reach the Kedd prematurely...’

High up in the shadows of the chamber, unnoticed by the celebrants, the needle-like tip of a spyeye protruded through the wall hangings.

From the research station on the surface of its fifth moon the cloud-banded globe of the gas giant Thaon filled twenty degrees of sky - forty times the width of the moon as seen from Earth. Like the moon, Thaon 5 was gravitationally locked with one hemisphere forever facing towards its massive primary. So the great globe perpetually hung low over the rim of the crater in which the experimental station nestled; passing through the cycle of its phases once every twelve days as Thaon 5 completed another orbit.

Currently Thaon was half full, bathing the station in a coppery light reflected from its cloud tops. Within its darkened hemisphere the ephemeral glowing pinpoints of monstrous; lightning storms could be seen. It was a magnificent spectacle, but for the moment there was nobody outside the base to admire it. The dish antennae of the communications tower were still, and the airlocks protruding from the cluster of regular dirt-covered mounds that concealed the buried workshops and living quarter modules were unused. The frantic round of checks and final adjustments had been completed on schedule, and the station staff were enjoying a few days' well-earned rest before the project's financiers arrived to observe the proving flight.

The result of their efforts stood a little way out across the level crater floor beside a mobile service gantry. It was an unusually compact spacecraft, quite different by comparison to the pair of standard shuttle landers that stood near by. But then it was one of a kind: a very special craft indeed. On its side was the name *Kingfisher*.

Then the stillness was broken.

An unlit and unmarked ship with a dull black non-reflective hull rose over the crater rim and sped low across the crater floor.

A turret mounted on its underside swivelled and pulsed with silent flashes of fire. A cloud of dust and rock erupted at the base of the station's communication mast. Light metal struts twisted and buckled and in majestic slow-motion it toppled to the ground. A second blaze of fire from the black ship's turret blew a gaping hole in the side of one of the

base's shuttles, and a third blast tore the landing legs out from under the other.

The black ship swung about in a tight arc and came into land in a spray of dust beside the *Kingfisher*, standing untouched by the destruction around it. Three spacesuited figures leapt from the black ship's hatch and ran in bounding low-gravity strides across to the *Kingfisher's* gantry, mounted rapidly and vanished through an airlock. The black ship tilted off and circled the crater, gun turret trained on the main station buildings. Two of the base crew, still snapping tight the fastening of their suits, tumbled out of the mouth of an airlock tunnel. The turret gun flashed again and the ground exploded ten metres in front of them. When the pall of dust had settled they had retreated and the outer door of the lock was shut once more.

The *Kingfisher's* drive tubes glowed into life. The ship stirred and then rose smoothly on a pale blue column of fire. In a couple of seconds it had cleared the gantry and was accelerating rapidly, with the black ship in close attendance. By the time the confused and frightened station crew ventured cautiously outside once more, both craft were just shrinking dots transiting the disc of Thaon and heading out into the depths of space.

The air of expectancy around the gaming table of the Lucky Strike Saloon was as intense as that in the Drell Temple, if less reverential. The crowd of onlookers had swelled as the pile of moneychips in the centre of the table grew.

'I match your hundred, Hailsey, and I'll throw in another fifty to see you,' said a mine foreman, a regular patron.

Hal Hailsey, a newcomer to the Lucky Strike, looked at him thoughtfully and then at the cards cupped in his own hand. The silence deepened. Absently he brushed his flowing moustache with a fingertip.

A blowzily attired woman on the edge of the crowd dropped her glass, causing players and spectators alike to start and glare at her in annoyance. She apologized in a slurred mumble and shuffled unsteadily away from the table,



dabbing her lips haphazardly with a scrap of lace from her garish evening bag. A robot 'tender trundled over to clear up the mess.

They returned their attention to the table to find Hailsey now beaming at his fellow players. He alone had not been disturbed by the distraction of the breaking glass, though of course nobody had noticed that.

He laid down an impressive spread of court cards before him. 'My hand, I think,' he said softly.

Shortly afterwards, a much richer Hal Hailsey emerged through the doors of the Lucky Strike's gaudy mock-clapboard frontage and into what passed for the night air under Anchorage Dome. A kilometre away to his right the illuminations of Mainstreet ended at the metal and plastic lattice wall of the dome rim. Through this could be seen the lights of a thousand-tonne mining borer as it crested the sharply curving horizon, gouging yet another mineral-rich strip in Klondyke's rugged surface. Beyond it lay the cold untwinkling stars of the outer system.

Hailsey took a circuitous route back to his modest lodgings, just in case any of his card-playing acquaintances should decide to recover their losses by unsporting means. Only when he was safely inside his rooms did he slip off his jacket and carefully remove the mechanism of the card holdout that was strapped about his wrist.

He had just poured himself a drink when there was a quiet rap on the door. After checking the peephole, he opened it to admit the woman who had dropped her glass in the Lucky Strike. Now, however, the alcoholic flush had magically vanished from her cheeks along with her gaudy make-up. She looked younger and her bearing was assured and steady.

'Fine timing, Lil,' he complimented her.

'Did you win the pot?' she asked, direct as ever.

'What do you think?' he grinned, pulling out a spray of moneychips. Lil deftly removed her percentage and slipped them into her bag.

'Stay for a drink?' Hailsey suggested hopefully.

She raised a warning eyebrow. 'This arrangement is strictly business only, remember?'

He shrugged and smiled; it was a private game they had played for a long time. 'Can't blame a man for asking.'

She grinned back. 'As long as that's all you do.'

As she turned to leave she glanced at the mailslot basket on the back of the door. 'Looks like you had a late delivery.'

It was a slim package. Hailsey frowned when he saw the label.

Jordan Tyne, c/o Hal Hailsey,  
17C Fairbanks Row,  
Anchorage Dome,  
KLONDYKE

Jordan Tyne was not a name he wished to be associated with that of Hailsey. The latter was an alias he had adopted for use on Klondyke, while the former was his real name known only to an exclusive few. He tore open the envelope. Instead of the expected data crystal there was a single-sheet letter. His frown deepened as he read the message.

'Bad news?' Lil asked. Tyne scratched his jaw.

'I don't know. Could be a joke... or it might be a chance to play in the big league. I'll have to check up on a few things first.'

'You'll cut me in if it's on the level?'

'Uh, maybe. I don't know if there's a slot in it for you yet.'

'Well, I'm game.'

'Lil, you're the best decoy in the business. If there's an angle I'll call you. Promise.'

After Lil had left, Tyne sat down at the room's battered console and called up the spaceline schedules.

'When's the next flight due out for Tempest?' he enquired.

## TEMPEST

The lecture room, with its small but select audience, was dark save for the illuminated screen. On it a progressive sequence of pictures showed a torch-lit crumbling stone-walled passageway, lined with niches in which rested dust-veiled statues. Bernice Summerfield, standing at a lectern beside the screen, lowered her voice dramatically.

‘Never before had I felt so close to Howard Carter when, over six hundred years ago, he was about to break into Tutankhamen’s tomb at Luxor. He recorded in his diary how his hands trembled as he made a small hole in the sealed door, inserted a candle and peered in. At first the escaping air that had been trapped within the tomb made the flame flicker too much to see clearly, but then it settled down and he began to make out the forms of statues and furnishings, glittering with gold and semi-precious stones. They were the funeral paraphernalia of an Egyptian boy-king who had died over three thousand years earlier. It still remains one of the most celebrated finds in the history of archaeology. But was it now my turn to equal it?’

‘We had been excavating the ancient tunnel system under Velopolis for weeks. Hundreds of metres above us was the bustling modern city, built upon the ruins of much older capitals where, so the legends said, its ancient kings had been interred in the deepest catacombs with all their finery. At last our work had opened a likely-looking tunnel, along which we edged cautiously, installing roof braces as we went.’

The next picture showed the tunnel closed by a wall of bricks sealed by looped ropes set in a clay bar, on which was impressed a crest and several lines of a strange script.

The scanner indicated there was a cavity on the other side. The message was written in the old Empire script, which Hanriss translated as: BEYOND THIS WALL LIES TRAKIMON, KING OF KINGS. RESTING IN ETERNAL SLEEP. It Was the tomb of Velopolis's third king and, just as in Luxor all those centuries before, its seal was still intact! I used the debonder on a pencil beam to cut a small hole in the wall. Also as in Luxor there was an outward rush of stale air so characteristic of burial chambers: the last breath of the dead, it's sometimes called. The finest perfume couldn't have smelt as sweet, because it further suggested the chamber was still untouched.

'We tried to pull the bricks free one by one, but they were surprisingly firm. I adjusted the debonder to a deeper cut and ran it around the wall in a man-sized circle. Still it didn't budge. Hanriss tapped it curiously, thinking it might be thicker than we had estimated, and the whole section fell inward with a crash, almost taking us with it.

Through the shower of dislodged dust I could just make out a seated figure, half-lit by our torches shining through the hole. Was this the first of a wonderful collection of funeral goods: some sentry statue left to guard the tomb?

'Then it moved!

It rose to its feet and shambled towards us menacingly. "What the hell do you dumb *chumkuks* think you're doing?" it bellowed. It was wearing a hard hat and coveralls and holding a half-eaten ham sandwich. We'd just broken into a modern sewer service tunnel during lunch hour!

There was surprised pause, then a roar of laughter from her audience. When it eventually abated, Bernice continued.

Trakimon's burial chamber must have collapsed and filled in naturally centuries before, leaving only the entrance passageway intact. The more recent sewer had been innocently cut right through it. Any remains had been chewed up by a mechanical borer, while the spray-on tunnel sealant and liner bonded the old bricks of the single remaining wall together in the way we found them.

We'll never know what had been lost due to that piece of careless civil engineering. But for a brief moment I had been one with Carter; knowing what it felt like to have the glories and wonders of a lost age almost in my grasp. And for that experience alone it had been worthwhile. Thank you.'

The applause was long and loud. Looks like you've earned your supper tonight, Bernice thought, bowing modestly.

### **From the diary of Professor Bernice Summerfield**

Once in a while a planet gets the name it deserves.

Tempest orbits a mildly unstable flare star, turning on its own axis in a little over twenty hours. It has lakes and shallow seas but no climate-moderating oceans, and a surface with so much topography that they have to stack half of it vertically to fit it all in. The atmosphere is in what's called a transitional stage; in other words a mess of both carbon and sulphur dioxide, nitrogen, significant traces of ammonia and methane, but with almost no free oxygen. There are also several chains of highly active volcanoes along tectonic fault zones, spewing out more gas and dust to add to the planetary cocktail.

All this combines to make weather fit for a meteorologist's nightmare: tornadoes, hurricanes, electrical storms, acid rain monsoons and enough ionized layers in the atmosphere to negate all electromagnetic communications over anything but the very short range. On Tempest even the next hour's weather forecast is pretty much of a lottery, and the atmosphere's so turbulent that the only places where a spacer can set down in reasonable safety are the poles. There's no air traffic. Here they don't tell you to go jump in a lake if they want you to dispose of yourself, they say: 'Go fly.'

So who'd want to live in such a place?

Well, when it was first surveyed about a hundred and fifty years ago, they found that though there was no intelligent life the unusual conditions had bred some diverse flora and fauna that lived nowhere else, some of which could be put to pharmacological use. A disease which had resisted all

previous drug treatments succumbed to an extract from a Tempest fungi, and then suddenly the bio-industries got interested. More fungi hunters and fanners began arriving, and, in due course, some became embarrassingly rich.

And, as rich people do, they had to find some way of passing the time in between counting their shillings. Various clubs and societies sprouted like (ha ha) mushrooms, and among them was the Carlsbad Archaeological Society. An odd choice, you might think, considering Tempest has no indigenous archaeology over a century and a half old. But I suppose we all need hobbies, and apparently over the years the CAS has done useful work: collecting specimens from half the sector, organizing off-world expeditions - and on occasions entertaining guest lecturers.

Yes, the fame of the holder of the Edward Watkinson Chair of Archaeology at the St Oscar's U. of Dellah has even reached Tempest!

*Extract ends*

The house was literally built halfway up a cliff.

It, and possibly the cliff as well for all Bernice knew, belonged to Nathan Costermann, one of the CAS's founder members and evidently unusually wealthy even by the standards of Tempest's upper classes.

The dining table was of genuine imported Earth oak and seated twenty guests. It was set on a broad stone terrace, half of which was excavated out of the cliffside, while the rest, in a demonstration of expensive engineering bravado, cantilevered out over a five-hundred-metre sheer drop. The semi-dome which protected the terrace from Tempest's atmosphere was made of some crystal-clear plastic composite that was virtually invisible, allowing an uninterrupted view out over Thunder Canyon. Tempest's sudden night had fallen, and the only illumination of its perpetual lower cloud layer came from the lightning storm currently playing about the jagged peaks on the opposite side of the valley. Blue-white forks flickered across the land, while every few seconds

the boiling clouds above them were illuminated by a hidden sheet of cold fire, starkly highlighting the whole valley.

The dome muted the sound to a faint murmur, hardly rising above the discreet piped music and the even more discreet human waiters (no roboservers for Costermann). But the flashes kept catching Bernice's eyes like a fireworks display with the volume turned down, and she wished somebody would opacify the dome. But looking round the faces about her nobody else seemed bothered. She was sure that the whole terrace trembled slightly under the impact of the intermittent hurricane-force gusts.

'Getting pretty wild out there,' she observed casually to Preston Galloway, president of the Society and her official escort for the dinner.

The normally amiable older man looked slightly surprised, then replied a little stiffly, 'Why yes, I suppose it is, Professor,' then returned his attention quickly to his plate.

Bernice felt she had spoken out of turn. Was it bad form on Tempest to acknowledge the power of the elements during formal occasions? A shower of hailstones the size of golfballs shattered against the dome in a furious cascade for half a minute, then melted away again. The chattering voices around the table had risen to compensate for the drumming onslaught, then subsided naturally as it passed without comment. The more I learn the more I realize I don't have to look outside my own species to find behavioural quirks quite as strange as those of any alien society, she thought. Then she felt a sudden unaccountable flutter of anxiety within her. What was the matter? Why should Tempest or its inhabitants affect her differently from any of a hundred other worlds she had visited? The question niggled uneasily at the back of her mind all through the meal.

Despite the external distractions the food was excellent, and Bernice did it full justice. But once dinner was finished and the party had broken up into smaller chattering groups strolling about the terrace, her feeling of unease returned. She thought wistfully of drinks in the college bar at St Oscar's with a bunch of students, or a faculty dinner where

insults and even the occasional ballistic bread roll were exchanged in a cheerful atmosphere of intellectual give and take and deep professional jealousy. Here any such undercurrents were on a different plane, leaving her excluded. However, she was committed to seeing the thing through, and so she nursed her drink and made polite conversation, whilst secretly counting the minutes until she could decently take her leave. Galloway was politeness itself in his own way, but unfortunately no master of small talk.

‘So... as I said. Professor. Most entertaining lectures. Mostly entertaining.’

‘Thank you,’ Bernice said for the tenth time.

‘Actually...’ he gave a little chuckle, ‘I must admit I had some reservations about inviting you to Tempest. I had read your book... er, *Down Among the Dead Men*. Fascinating work, of course, but I wondered if it wasn’t a trifle... er, irreverent in parts. Beyond mere anecdote, I mean. We may be amateurs in the CAS but we are very serious in our pursuits, so you understand my doubts. However, it’s all worked out splendidly in the end, so I’m glad I let myself be persuaded otherwise.’

Bernice wondered if he realized he was being patronizing. Probably not. ‘Not half as glad as I am,’ she said aloud, thinking deliberately of the credit order now residing in her account to give her words that ring of sincerity.

Then they were interrupted by a woman who had been introduced when she arrived as Cynthia something-or-other - Bernice couldn’t recall exactly. Galloway left them alone, perhaps grateful to relinquish the responsibility of entertaining their guest. Very soon Bernice found herself missing him.

‘But my dear Professor,’ Cynthia-something drawled relentlessly, ‘as a woman how ever do you manage to survive away from civilization for months on end on one of these dig things of yours? I mean, I don’t know what I’d do if I couldn’t visit my body toner at least once a week.’

Cynthia was cosmeticized, perfumed and coiffured down to the last follicle. Her diamond-beringed hands were



immaculately manicured, causing Bernice unconsciously to hide her own worn nails and calloused palms and briefly regret abandoning her aspirations to a more glamorous image. Cynthia's designer gown probably cost fifty times the price of the respectable little black dress Bernice was wearing, besides being at least three seasons ahead of it. How many generations was she removed from Tempest's founding fathers, Bernice wondered, toying with the idea of letting herself get falling down drunk and start singing one of those amusing songs whose lyrics only came back to her at such times. She decided reluctantly not to give in to the temptation in case her hosts asked for their money back. Instead she forced the muscles of her face into a smile and leant slightly forward as though bestowing a confidence.

'Well, don't tell anybody else, but the university does actually provide all its archaeological field teams with complete mobile health spas hidden inside disguised all-purpose burial mounds. We just pretend to rough it to get more sponsorship money.'

Cynthia blinked foolishly for a moment, then exclaimed, 'Oh, I say... that's priceless!'

Her laugh, Bernice thought, resembled the lament of a bereaved donkey.

Fortunately Nathan Costermann himself interrupted them at that moment. 'Will you excuse us for a few minutes, Cynthia? There is a matter on which I'd like Professor Summerfield's professional opinion.'

Bernice allowed herself to be led away through the small planter jungle of exotic and very carefully tended shrubs that tinged the terrace.

'Sorry about Cynthia,' Costermann said, when they were out of earshot. 'She can be tiresome at times.'

'Thanks for rescuing me.'

Costermann was a tall middle-aged man with greying hair, but still appearing lean and fit. Ghost lines on his face told of younger harder years in contrast to his present luxury. His eyes were grey, sharp and very assured. She hadn't been introduced to any partner, so she assumed he was

unattached. A hard man, Bernice guessed, but at least something approaching a real person.

‘Did you actually want my opinion about something, or was that just a ruse?’ she enquired lightly.

Costermann smiled. ‘More or less. I did want to tell you how much I appreciated your most stimulating and entertaining talks. I really am glad you came to Tempest.’

Bernice sensed the genuine unreserved warmth of his words. ‘Thanks. I’m glad it’s all gone so well.’

They reached the balcony rail that ran just inside the dome. Beyond it the lightning flickered and the wind howled.

‘It’s quite a view,’ she observed. ‘But don’t you feel a bit exposed up here?’

‘On the contrary,’ said Costermann, ‘I feel more secure here than anywhere else. Solid rock behind me and an impassable moat guarding all other approaches.’ He smiled as he gestured out at the storm-wracked valley.

‘You’d think this would put off all but the most masochistic settlers,’ Bernice said.

‘Yet Tempest has a population of over thirty million, even if they are scattered rather thinly,’ Costermann said with a trace of pride.

‘Due to the attraction of your famous fungi and the chance to get seriously rich. Where there is money to be made, there follows man.’

‘An interesting phrase, Professor Summerfield. I must remember it.’

‘It’s copyright. I get ten per cent royalties on its use.’

Costermann smiled. ‘Ah, you are learning how we do things on Tempest. Well, why not? It’s allowed me to build my -’

‘Dream castle in the clouds?’

Costermann smiled. ‘That depends on the weather. Fortunately my castle has very solid foundations.\* He stamped his foot hard to demonstrate the point.

Bernice winced, thinking of the drop under them. ‘Don’t you ever worry about all this coming loose or something?’

‘Not at all, Professor. I have every confidence in the methods used to secure it.’

‘Rock bolts, strong glue, that sort of thing?’

‘Something more fundamental than that: money.’

‘Pardon?’

‘Never underestimate the power of money. If there should be a major structural failure the builders would be ruined. It would be worse if I was injured or died as a result of their poor workmanship. I pay very efficient lawyers considerable sums to ensure that would happen. The builders know that and I know that, and so, because of money, I am certain they have done a thorough job.’

Bernice raised an eyebrow. ‘You’re not exactly bashful about being rich, are you?’

‘Of course not. I’ve worked hard for what I’ve got, so why shouldn’t I enjoy its benefits? Anybody who comes to Tempest with enough guts and determination can do the same. Twenty-five years ago I started out a grade-two research chemist at Integrated Polymers. Now I own the company. I used my brains to accumulate money, and used that money to make more money. Its acquisition was a measure of my success, and the respect paid me by those who recognized it as such grew accordingly. There’s nothing to be ashamed of in being wealthy. It allows me to meet fascinating people... such as yourself.’

Bernice tried to look modest. ‘You flatter me.’

‘Perhaps you underrate your reputation.’

‘You’re sure you don’t mean *disreputation*? I’ve hardly had a model academic career so far.’

‘But you came nevertheless.’

‘Your society’s fee was most... uh, persuasive.’

‘Where there is money to be made there follows Summerfield?’ Costermann suggested.

‘Mr Costermann, do you think I’m completely mercenary?’ Bernice retorted in mock dismay, then grinned. ‘You’re right, of course. It was the vacation and the home coffers were running low, and so I thought: why not?’ She sipped her drink. ‘It will be a novel sensation to be solvent for a while. I’ve never collected sufficient filthy lucre to enjoy the sort of leverage you evidently have. In any argument with the

builders I'd have to fall back on trying to see their point of view and using carefully reasoned argument. Then if that failed I'd try a knee in the groin.'

Costermann chuckled. 'Oh, physicality has its place as well at times. It's just that I've found money is the surest way to achieve one's desires. But, talking of things of value, Professor, would you be interested in viewing my own collection of antiquities? It's not large, but I have a few pieces that might interest you, and I understand you're leaving us tomorrow so you won't have another chance.'

'Yes, I'd like that. I'm afraid your terrace is beginning to make me feel seasick.'

Smiling, Costermann led the way through a side door and down a hallway cut out of the living rock. Thick carpets contrasted with the texture of the artfully exposed stone, while carefully positioned lighting illuminated paintings and pieces of sculpture any one of which was worth more than Bernice's yearly salary. She tried not to feel envious and very nearly succeeded. The hall led to a lofty inner atrium from which several doors and halls opened.

Seated beside one particularly solid-looking door was a minotaur in a lounge suit.

'All secure, Tralbet?' Costermann enquired of the Narg, as it slowly rose to its feet and loomed over them, small red eyes peering out of its massive horned head, with its mobile ears and short curved horns all balanced on a thick muscle-corded neck.

'All secure, sir,' came a voice from the basement levels of the vocal range.

The creature's resemblance to the monster of Greek myth was, Bernice knew, purely a case of neo-parallel evolution: a plains animal forced into bipedism by changing climate while still retaining much of its herbivorous physiology and natural means of defence. Narg were good at jobs which required brawn and patience, rather than intellectual acuity.

'Tralbet sees to the security of my house and my person,' Costermann explained. 'He's quite invaluable.'

'I'm sure he is,' Bernice said quickly, smiling up at the mass of leathery flesh and slabs of muscle. Privately she thought he looked a surly specimen, but then alien moods and expressions were sometimes hard to decipher. Perhaps those furrowed brow ridges and wrinkled snout were the equivalent of a bright smile?

'This is Professor Summerfield, Tralbet. She wants to have a look at my collection. Make sure we're not disturbed.'

'Right, sir,' the Narg rumbled.

The collection room was like a tiny museum, with exhibits neatly labelled and displayed in illuminated cabinets and shelves. Bernice's mouth watered at the sight of some of the pieces, and the cash register of her mind added another few zeros to the estimate of Costermann's wealth. But there was no doubt as to what was the prize of the collection.

It stood alone in the centre of the room on its own small table. It was a sculpture about thirty centimetres high, formed out of blue crystal with paler bubbles trapped within it that fluoresced softly under the lights. Heads, both humanoid and alien, rose from a single trunk and spread like the foliage of a tree. The detailing of their individual expressions was superb, and each radiated a deep sense of inner life and - there was no better word for it Bernice decided - nobility. It could have been grotesque, but the artist had achieved some unlikely harmony among the disparate elements which teased the eye into accepting them as a whole.

'Ah, yes: my Drell Imnulate,' said Costermann. 'Chalcite crystal with zalene gas bubbles. Technically that makes it impure, but then that hardly matters as it's unique in itself. And beautiful, of course.' She saw blue reflections sparkle in his eyes, and his hard features seemed momentarily to soften. 'Do you know its history?'

'A little,' Bernice said. 'In Drellite belief it's meant to represent a symbolic amalgam of sentient life forms. A sort of universal being.'

'That's right. It was said to have been made by the founder of their movement millennia ago. It was lost in some religious

schism and only rediscovered about forty years back. It passed through several hands before I acquired it. Now the Drell sect has been revived I've had offers for its return.' He grimaced. 'Some communications were less civil than that in fact, hence my security precautions.'

'Threats?'

'Not exactly. Warnings that my soul is in peril if I don't hand it over to them and that sort of thing. Why they think invoking a damnation I do not believe exists will frighten me into co-operating I don't know.'

'But as you say you must take precautions. Money and possessions have their downside as well, don't they.'

'What doesn't? However, on balance I'm well content. My money has allowed me to acquire these beautiful things and enjoy them in comfort. It's even brought you here to entertain and inform me.'

'But you haven't *bought* me,' Bernice reminded him. 'Though I suppose you'd say everybody has their price.'

She thought he would argue the point. Unexpectedly he nodded.

'Oh, I accept that some people cannot be bought. Professor. At least, not by money -'

He broke off as there came the sound of a muffled commotion from the outside. Costermann strode rapidly across the room and flung the door open.

In the atrium a knot of dinner guests and two frightened maids were looking on apprehensively at a man struggling in Tralbet's iron grasp. Bernice glimpsed a bristling Mohican crest of hair and strong angular flushed features. The intruder twisted round and pointed an accusing finger at Costermann.

'What the hell do you think you're playing at?' he demanded angrily. 'How could you do this to us!'

'You are here without invitation, Mr Lankril, and you are also disturbing my guests,' Costermann replied coldly. 'This is neither the time or place to discuss business matters. Next time you call, please have the courtesy to make a proper

appointment first. Tralbet, please show the gentleman out immediately.'

Though he was tall and well-muscled, Lankril could not break the grip of Tralbet's huge hand on his collar. He was impelled firmly towards the main door, still struggling futilely.

'You promised you'd guarantee the loan!' the angry young man shouted over his shoulder. 'How are we going to manage until the next harvest?'

But Costermann had turned his back on him.

Tralbet and Lankril disappeared round a corner. There came the slam of a heavy door and peace returned, broken only by the puzzled twitterings of the onlookers. Costermann went over apologetically to reassure his guests, leaving Bernice alone for a moment. The sense of disquiet she felt earlier returned. Even Costermann's castle in the clouds was not impregnable, it seemed.

Now why did that thought send a shiver down her spine?

The equinox had long passed and Tempest's North Pole was well into its near half-year-long night. Thule Dome's many lights illuminated a shimmering blanket of wind-driven ice spicules, which rose and fell in great slow-motion rippling waves as they rolled across the white desert beyond its walls. The only breaks in the uniformity were the flickering pin-points of outlying navigation beacons and the jagged fingers of ice ridges, thrust upward along fault lines by pressure changes deep under the polar cap.

The air above the ice storm was by contrast crystal clear, all suspended dust and moisture having long since frozen out of it, allowing Thule's lights to bathe the underside of the clouds with their glow. Here Tempest's complex and violent meteorology was at last subdued by the cold if not entirely tamed. It was never calm, even at the poles, but the electrical storms were muted and the winds fell to reasonable magnitudes. As occasionally it did, a rift slowly opened in the perpetual cloud layer, swirling and widening until it encompassed half the sky. As though a ragged tunnel were being bored upward, the vortex of clear air rose and broke through to the cloud tops. For a few moments the jet black of space could be seen, dusted with the stars that shone down nowhere else on the planet. Then the rift folded in on itself again and was gone.

Owen Rosen, sitting alone at a small corner table of the Starview Lounge's upper gallery, looked out through the dome wall at the spectacle with unseeing eyes. Every few minutes he snatched a nervous glance at his watch.

What was he doing here? What had he got himself into? How could he have been so stupid!



‘Mr Rosen, I presume,’ said a quiet voice, interrupting his confused thoughts.

He twisted about with a start to find a man looking down at him.

The newcomer was slightly below average height, carried a valise and was dressed in a neat suit. He had remarkably bland unmemorable features. Rosen couldn’t have said quite what he expected, but not this. He nodded dumbly.

‘You can call me Smith,’ said the stranger, seating himself opposite Rosen. ‘That name will serve as well as any other.’ His words were mild and indeed his whole appearance was quite innocuous. Except for his eyes. There was nothing innocuous about them, Rosen now realized. He found his voice at last.

‘Was it you who called me?’

‘It was. As I said, I believe we can do some business together to our mutual advantage. I am glad to see you decided to be sensible and take up the offer.’

‘What sort of... business?’

‘All in good time,’ Smith smiled, but the humour did not reach his eyes. ‘I understand you like to gamble, Mr Rosen.’ It was a statement not a question. ‘But shall we say your enthusiasm does not equal your skill.’ Smith pulled a bound sheaf of note slips from an inside pocket, smoothed them out and laid them on the table before him. Rosen looked at them in amazement. ‘These are all your outstanding IOUs and pledges: total value slightly over forty-eight thousand shillings. And now they all belong to me. And I’m calling them in us of this moment.’

‘You can’t!’

‘Oh, but I can. And if you don’t redeem them I shall see they are brought to the attention of your employers. And then I think you would be out of a job very shortly afterwards, with very poor prospects of finding a new position. Very poor indeed.’ And he shook his head slightly, as though dismayed by the unfairness of life.

With a trembling hand Rosen picked up the glass before him and drained it. Taking a deep breath he said, ‘All right.

You've made your point. What do you want me to do? But listen: I... I won't hurt anybody. You can't make me do that. I may have been a fool but there are limits, you know.'

'Well, that's perfectly fine, Mr Rosen,' Smith replied amiably, 'because I wouldn't dream of asking you to do any such thing. I can always find people to hurt others when necessary.' Rosen shivered. 'But none have your combination of technical skills and position of trust. Very simply, I want you to take something with you when you return to duty tomorrow.'

'You seem to know a lot about my movements.'

'I try to be well informed, Mr Rosen.'

'What do you want me to take?'

Smith withdrew a Hat rectangular padded package from his valise and slid it across the table to Rosen, who stared at it blankly.

'What is it?'

'Nothing dangerous, I assure you. It simply contains an electronic device, the exact function of which you do not need to know. All I want you to do, during the course of your routine work, is to place it in a specified location. That should pose no problem to someone in your position. But it must be done unobtrusively, naturally. The instructions are all in there, together with details of how to contact me when the job is done.' He picked up the pledge slips and returned them to his pocket. 'If all goes satisfactorily, you will receive these in due course, to do with as you will.'

'That's all?'

'That's all.'

'But how do I know it'll stop there, or that you'll return my pledges like you say?'

'Well, of course you don't,' Smith admitted easily. 'But then you really have no other choice, do you?'

Rosen took a deep breath, picked up the package and tucked it inside his own pocket.

'That's fine,' said Smith. 'Now, if you would be so kind as to wait here for, say, ten minutes while I make my own departure.' He leant forward slightly, a sharper edge entering

his soft voice. 'I wouldn't want you to be tempted into following me with the idea of gaining some advantage. That wouldn't be a very sensible thing to do, Mr Rosen. Not very sensible at all. We shall not meet again in person. Good day to you.'

And he walked briskly away, leaving Rosen staring after him in a sick daze. Eventually he recovered himself sufficiently to signal a passing roboserver. He pushed his empty glass towards it.

'Another of the same,' he demanded wearily.

In fact the man calling himself Smith did not leave the Starview Lounge immediately, but entered one of the washrooms that opened off the restaurant's lobby. When, ten minutes later, Rosen himself walked with heavy steps out through the lobby, a man of superficially different facial appearance and dress to that of Mr Smith exited the washroom and followed after him. During the next twenty minutes lie did not let the unsuspecting Rosen out of his sight.

This covert observation ended when Rosen took the appropriate tubeway back to his own apartment block. He had made no attempt to contact anybody, or behaved in any way abnormally except for displaying a somewhat resigned and distracted manner.

Satisfied, the man who called himself Smith then entered a public washroom, to emerge shortly afterwards transformed yet again. There was no sign of the business suit or valise. Instead he carried a workman's toolkit and wore coveralls bearing a bold design familiar all over Tempest: a sphere encapsulating the initials TGR.

It was the logotype of Trans-Global Railways.

## DEPARTURE

### **From the diary of Professor Bernice Summerfield**

Tempest's early colonists travelled in sealed ground cars. Only once the farms and settlements became permanent did they start building the monorail lines, which are their only means of long-range rapid transport. Now the network crosses the planet from the equator, approximately where Carlsbad City is situated, to the poles, where the spaceports are.

The mainline trains typically comprise fifteen or sixteen large double-decked cars, linked by spherical airlock coupler modules. They're built more like ground-level spacecraft - not surprising since they have to function in total isolation from Tempest's moderately poisonous atmosphere for several days at a time, recycling their air and water.

They're not typical maglev trains. Due to Tempest's electromagnetic storms a modified system is used so that they are propelled and supported by pure force fields. There are no wheels, of course. A pity. I'm probably one of the few people nowadays who know that their distant predecessors were once classified by the number and arrangement of their massive iron wheels, and that there actually used to be railway workers with the arcane title of 'wheeltappers'.

The monorails made tourism a practical and growing industry on Tempest, bringing in off-worlders to ogle the scenery, which I must admit is pretty spectacular. I think they enjoy a spurious sense of danger from watching the untamed wilds on the other side of the armourglass.

Personally I just want to sit back in comfort with a long drink and let somebody else worry about the driving.

Welcome aboard Trans-Global Railway's *Polar Express*, Professor Summerfield,' said the man in the immaculate blue uniform and gleaming buttons, as he checked Bernice's ticket. 'I am Chief Steward Bassit. I hope you will have a pleasant journey.'

Bassit was a dapper fatherly figure of a man, who radiated in air of calm professional assurance coupled with genuine pleasure in welcoming his passengers.

'Are the drinks still free?' Bernice enquired earnestly.

'They are. Professor,' Bassit replied imperturbably.

'Then I'm sure I'll have a great journey.'

Preston Galloway, who had escorted her to the station, smiled uncertainly.

'I didn't really have time to appreciate the... er, hospitality on the journey down,' Bernice said by way of explanation. 'Had to get my lecture notes in order and so forth. But now I think I can afford to indulge myself a little, don't you?'

'Ah... of course,' said Galloway.

Carlsbad's station, which served two local tracks besides the main line, was housed in part of the same natural cave system that had been enlarged and extended over the years to build the city itself. Its rock walls echoed to voices raised in leave taking and the rattle of mechanical loaders. Down the lung platform passengers were boarding, while at the far end ill the station they were placing the last of the cargo into the goods carriages and sealing their hatches.

Well, goodbye, Professor,' said Galloway. 'I'm sure you will, er, have a good trip.' He shook her hand. 'Thank you once again for your most enjoyable and informative talks.'

'It's been a pleasure,' said Bernice.

'Perhaps you will visit us again one day and tell us about some of your more recent work.'

'Curious to see how I spend your money?'

Galloway smiled. 'I'm sure you will put it to good use, Professor.'

‘I promise you I’ll buy myself a new spade the moment I get back,’ she said sincerely.

Chief Steward Bassit signalled to a roboSERVER. ‘First Class Car A, Compartment six,’ he told it.

‘First Class.’ Bernice savoured the words aloud, as the squat wheeled robot trundled over and gathered up her bags in its eager mechanical arms.

‘Tempest may seem a little stratified and old-fashioned in this respect,’ Galloway admitted, ‘but we do like the guests of our society to feel appreciated.’

‘I shoulder the burden of luxury bravely,’ she assured him, ‘knowing that this sort of treatment could render me incapable of travelling Tourist or Steerage ever again.’

For a moment Galloway frowned, as though trying to reconcile her words within his own ordered straightforward nature. Then he broke into unexpected but hearty laughter. ‘You are a most uncommon person, Professor Summerfield,’ he said.

Bernice smiled as she followed her baggage through the double outer doors of the nearest coupler module into the train, leaving a still chuckling Galloway standing on the platform.

Car A, like the other First Class carriage, had a row of four single and double-berth compartments set on either side of the lower deck corridor. Also opening off this central corridor were small spiral staircases which led up to the three luxury stateroom compartments above. Bernice’s compartment was a spacious single with its own compact washroom.

As Bernice settled herself and looked out through its triple laminated window, she heard the last doors being sealed.

‘Stand clear please,’ Bassit’s voice sounded over the speakers. ‘The *Polar Express* is about to depart.’

The *Express* rose a little higher over the track and began to glide slowly forward. People were waving up to friends and relations, reminding Bernice of the departure of a great ocean liner from another lost age. Caught up in the mood she found herself waving back to Galloway who had waited politely on the platform, and then indiscriminately at everyone else.

The airseal enclosing the track ahead of the engine irised open as it nosed forward into the narrow tunnel beyond. A ring of steam jets played dramatically around them as the main body of the train passed through, neutralizing any traces of external atmosphere that might leak in as it left. Bernice thought it added drama to their departure, apart from being an unintentional homage to the days of steam power. The tunnel interior was ringed by banks of harsh blue and white striplights, intended to kill intruding native moulds with an antiseptic dose of ultraviolet. Interspersed with these were three more ballooning airseal gaskets, each fitting so tightly that they brushed the train's streamlined bodywork.

Then the artificial light faded and a slight shudder ran down the train. The engine had passed through the last airseal out into the turbulent air of Tempest. A ring of tan-grey light raced towards Bernice's window, the outer doors of the tunnel flashed past and suddenly she was in the open. The wind shudder gradually faded away as the automatic compensators adjusted.

Bernice looked out on the Tempest version of an equatorial jungle. A riot of multicoloured vegetation carpeting the valley floor, the colours rapidly fading into a monochrome ochre tint which was the product of a windblown haze of dust and mist. Low compact dwarf trees swayed and lashed about under its impact, hugging the ground with thick spreading roots. The purple trailing stems of ribbon plants rippled and streamed like seaweed in a rip tide. A football-sized seed pod tumbled and bounced between the other plants, and she knew it might be carried tens of kilometres until it found a secure foothold. Up the clefts and crevices of the valley side climbed tree-trunk-thick creepers, adhering to the rock with their sucker-tipped tendrils. Above them the jagged peaks vanished into the rolling clouds.

It was almost noon, but there was no sign of the disc of the sun itself, merely a diffuse glow in the mottled sulphurous sky.

The *Express* steadily gathered speed. Bernice twisted around and looked back along the arc of the track, suspended over the valley floor by its line of marching pylons, to the mountain which contained Carlsbad City. Already it was becoming indistinct in the haze, and the many windows and balconies piercing its outer walls were no longer visible. Then they rounded a bend and the mountain was lost from view, and the only sign that civilization existed on the planet beyond the train was the snaking monorail track itself. Posts projecting from the side of the track flashed past every 250 metres, bearing lens systems on their tips. They were short-range optical receiver/transmitters, which connected the *Express's* internal communications net to the branch of the planetary optical fibre data conduit which ran under the monorail rack. It was now their only link with the outside world.

Suddenly it all seemed to Bernice to be a very fragile construction to rely upon in such a wild environment, and she wondered if that was why the locals ignored the power of the elements. With a slight shiver she turned away from the window, only to catch sight of her reflection in a wall mirror.

Her image seemed to stare back uncompromisingly.

She had short dark hair still without any trace - at least no obvious trace - of grey. A nose a little large, but otherwise regular enough. Eyes clear but slightly defensive, perhaps? There were a few fine lines around the eyes and mouth, which she was learning to think of as distinctive marks of character. Not a bad face overall.

But what lay beneath the skin?

It was one of those testing moments of acute self-awareness that she suspected would come more frequently with the years. I am me, here, now... but not for ever. The feeling of undefined foreboding the night before returned to her, and now, shut in an isolated torpedo of metal and plastic as it raced through a hostile land, she realized just how uncertain and ephemeral life was. Though the journey still had several thousand kilometres to go, it seemed the *Express* had already carried her to an unwelcome



confrontation with the fact of her own existence, and therefore her ultimate mortality. Her mirror image reflected her doubts and fears all too plainly. That's me in there and it's all I'll ever have for certain. I keep the world at bay with booze and sarcasm, but what am I really?

Don't fight it, a little voice inside said seductively. It's times like this that strong drink was made for.

With an effort Bernice shook off the bleak mood. She unpacked her bags then made herself spend a while updating her diary. Outside a shower of spray splattered across the window as the *Express* plunged through a narrow canyon and they were deluged by the wind-torn outpouring of a waterfall, issuing from some invisible source in the clouds.

Only with duty satisfied did she allow herself to think about a drink again. She could always have the 'servers bring one along, but it would be more pleasant, and probably more sensible in the circumstances, to imbibe in company. She checked her watch, which was receiving its time signal from Tempest's global timebase relayed through the *Express*, and saw it was nearly 11.00. By the local day/night cycle of twenty slightly stretched hours, that was almost 13.00 by Terran standard: lunchtime.

She glanced in the mirror again.

'OK, you've used up your angst ration for the week,' she told herself firmly, 'now get out there and enjoy yourself.'

The First Class dining car was already filling when she arrived. The tables were laid with brilliant white cloths and napkins, fine china plates and silverware and tiny decorous sprays of flowers. The display of elegance made her wish she'd put on something smarter, and she made a mental note to dress up for dinner. She searched for her table placecard, passing a few diners already seated.

A middle-aged human couple, clearly tourists by their costume, were peering out of the window with interest. The woman glanced up and gave her a quick friendly smile. At the next table a lean blond man perhaps a few years younger than herself was apparently engrossed in a study of the

menu. But his eyes flicked across her quickly as she passed him, making her feel as though she had been expertly assessed and catalogued. A pinch-cheeked grey-haired man in a severe dark suit sat with a pretty younger woman. The family resemblance was obvious. Her dress was neat but plain, and seemed to Bernice to be slightly old-fashioned. As Bernice passed them, the girl asked the man meekly: 'Father, can I try the galoshi. please?' A small alien sat alone at the next table. Bernice noted a bald head of copper red skin, pointed ears and large independently mobile chameleon eyes peering out of a gnome-like face. He was wearing a modified version of a Terran business suit, and a bowler hat and furred umbrella lay across the side of his table. A young girl of seven or eight sat at the next table together with two adults who were obviously her mother and father. '...and you'll be able to see the stars when we get to Thule,' her mother was promising her. Beyond them was a grizzled thick-set man wearing a highly patterned, expensive jacket. He sat opposite a beautiful and much younger woman, who was giggling coquettishly at him. Bernice assessed the subtlety of her make-up and the depth of the cleavage and decided she was unlikely to be either his daughter or niece.

Bernice found her table, scanned the menu pad and quickly tapped in an order. Then she called up the wine list. At least she'd start drinking decorously. In a minute a 'server rolled up with a half-bottle of Chambrey '57, which it uncorked and poured with mechanical efficiency, then glided away again.

She looked around as she drank. Displays mounted over the car end doors showed their current speed, distance travelled so far and the estimated time of arrival at Amazonia, their first stop, which they would reach later that afternoon. So far they had only come a little over a hundred kilometres, and they still had the best part of ten thousand to go before reaching Thule. Ideally the trip would take three or four of Tempest's shorter days, which even allowing time for stops meant an average speed of less than 150 kph, assuming the weather held. The *Lunar Flyer*, she recalled, could reach 900

kph. But then it travelled through a vacuum, not Tempest's turbulent atmosphere.

'Denn!' a woman's voice exclaimed suddenly above the chatter.

'What are you doing here, Lankril?' a man demanded sternly. 'I thought I made it plain your attentions to Clarris are not welcome!'

Along with several others, Bernice looked around curiously.

The voices came from the table belonging to the father and daughter. Standing beside it was the young man she had last seen being dragged bodily down Costermann's hallway the previous night.

'I promise you I had no idea you were taking the *Express*, Mr Sommers,' he protested to the older man. 'I only booked at the last minute.'

'Really,' Sommers grunted disbelievingly.

Lankril bristled, rapidly shedding his deferential manner. 'I assure you it's the truth. Do you doubt my word?'

Sommers looked as though he was going to pursue the matter, but his daughter begged plaintively, 'Father. Denn. Please, not here.'

'I shall eat in my compartment,' Lankril announced, and he turned on his heel and walked stiffly back through the communicating door.

Then the 'servers began trundling in with the first courses, and calm descended once more on the carriage as the aroma of line food claimed the travellers' attention.

Bernice spent most of that afternoon in a very comfortable reclining chair in a corner of the observation lounge above the dining room. She could have returned to her compartment, but she felt the need for company, if not conversation. She dozed, partly to digest her excellent meal but also because her biorhythms were out of step with Tempest's compressed diurnal cycle. There were drugs that could help such adjustment, she knew, but it was hardly worth the bother just for the remaining few days of her stay. Some of the other occupants of the lounge followed her example, while the more

alert talked quietly or played table games. The more daring experimented with the realwood unpowered baby grand piano in one corner, or simply watched the rugged land speed past them beyond the curving panoramic windows.

Just before dark the line branched into a siding and the *Express* pulled into the station of Amazonia. The town was far smaller than Carlsbad, and its station was a simple excavation in a hillside and not enclosed. Telescopic loading tubes were extended to clamp on to the *Express's* sides about the doors and cargo hatches, allowing local passengers from the economy cars and freight to disgorge. As soon as they were clear new goods containers and travellers took their place. After ten minutes the loading tubes retracted. Idly Bernice imagined whistles being blown and flags waved as in days of old as the *Express* pulled away, snaking back on to the main line once again and picking up speed.

The display in the lounge changed to show their next stop was Spume Lake, which they would reach in the early hours of the next morning. Bernice lazily shifted in her chair again. Unwind for a few days, she told herself. Why shouldn't she enjoy a bit of luxury and pampering for a change?

'Good afternoon. Professor. It seems our last farewell was somewhat premature.'

Bernice blinked her eyes open and struggled to sit up straight. To her surprise she found Nathan Costermann beaming down at her. He took an adjacent seat, snapping his fingers for the lounge's 'server, which rolled over and dispensed a drink to his order.

'I didn't realize you were on board,' Bernice said, stifling a yawn and trying to sound alert. 'You weren't at lunch.'

'I ate in my compartment. I had some work to complete.'

'Perhaps that's just as well. Did you know your gate-crasher from last night is also on the train?'

'Denn Lankril? Is he really? I hope he's come to his senses.'

'I think he has other things on his mind at the moment. From what I overheard I gather this trip was a last-minute decision.' She looked at him enquiringly. 'I suppose it's the same with you?'

‘No. Actually I’ve been planning this for some time.’ He saw her look of surprise and smiled. ‘You’re wondering why I didn’t mention it to anybody last night. Well, I had a reason to keep my trip a secret. It’s my Drell Immulate. I’m taking it to Thule to be auctioned.’

Bernice raised her eyebrows. ‘You’re selling it? You know, I would have said you wouldn’t have parted with that for anything.’

Costermann smiled wistfully. ‘Oh, I still prize it deeply, Professor. But I’m a practical man. The pressure on me is simply going to increase, and I really don’t want the bother. I began to worry that my castle in the clouds, as you called it, would become my prison. I’ve had the pleasure of owning the Immulate for some while, and perhaps it’s time to let it go.’

‘I see. Well, I hope it’s securely locked away.’

‘It’s perfectly secure, but not exactly locked away.’

‘You mean you’re carrying it yourself? Is that safe?’

Costermann laughed. ‘Something might happen in a large city like Carlsbad, perhaps, but who’d be foolish enough to attempt anything on the *Express*? And at Thule there’ll be a lull security escort waiting. And even if it was stolen, how could anybody get it off the planet? Thule’s the only spaceport open at this time of year. That’s one reason why there’s very little crime on Tempest.’ He sipped his drink and smiled ruefully. ‘Nevertheless the Immulate’s very well protected. The insurers insisted. You should see the device they’ve foisted upon me. They were also the ones who had me keep quiet about my trip. By the way, would you care to take a longer, and hopefully undisturbed, look at the Immulate? It’s probably your last chance. I doubt any museum will touch it because they know the Drellites will only start pestering them, so it’ll either go to a private collection or to the Drell Mother Temple, and it’s a long way to Kamor.’

‘Yes, thanks,’ said Bernice. ‘I’d like that.’

Costermann’s upper deck two-bedroom compartment had its own lounge, expensively panelled in wood and complete with deep armchairs, drinks cabinet and matching bureau. Tralbet was sitting on guard much as Bernice had seen him

the previous day, and still as outwardly morose. Resting on a small table beside him was what looked like a standard medium-sized black suitcase.

‘Don’t be deceived by its external appearance,’ Costermann said, standing the case up on end and pressing down on a thumbprint lock. ‘The MaxSec case is apparently the last word in security containers. Apart from the usual sound, light and smoke dye alarms it has several other special features... which I won’t bore you with now. Shall we say between it and Tralbet I’ve no worries.’

The lid opened to reveal a thick plastiglass inner case inside which the Immulate rested, cocooned by foam plastic support rings. On either side of this container were mounted solid-looking grey boxes patterned with keypads, grills and softly pulsing lights. Costermann opened the inner case’s front panel with a second thumblock and stepped aside for her.

‘Go on. It’s perfectly safe to touch.’

Bernice reached into the transparent container and stroked the surface of the Immulate, enjoying the perfection of its contours. A new light blinked on the display panel but that was all.

‘Enjoy the beauty of the Immulate while you can, Professor, that’s the important thing. After this journey is over, you’ll probably never see its like again.’

\* \* \*

‘Hello, Owen. Your tour come round again, has it?’ said the man at the spaceport security desk. ‘Anything to declare?’

Owen Rosen casually dropped his bag on to the scanner plate and stepped through the arch. ‘Just the usual, Jak: the Carnellian fire stones, the half kilo of dreeth root and twenty illegal copies of the Wilton Carne concert.’

He’d been practising the throwaway line and the innocent wry grin for hours. He felt a bead of sweat forming over his right temple, but his voice was steady and his face perfectly controlled.

Jak chuckled. ‘You pirate Wilton Carne?’ he said, barely glancing at the scanner display. ‘You’re a sick man, Owen.’

'What do you think I need the dreeth root for?' Rosen came back smartly, even as he tensed himself for the sound of alarms.

But the lights on Jak's display remained green. The instructions that had come with Smith's device were correct: on a scanner it looked just like a cheap pocket vidi set. And being a company worker, Rosen knew his baggage was unlikely to be subjected to any physical search.

'Well, I'll let it go by this time,' said Jak easily, passing his bag through. 'See you in a ten-day.'

'See you, Jak,' said Rosen, catching up his bag and strolling lightly towards the boarding tubes for the ground-lo-orbit shuttle *Armara*.

Twenty minutes later the *Armara* lifted from Thule Port and powered its way up through the relatively calm air over Tempest's north pole. Within another half hour it had docked at the Skystation.

Tempest's sudden night had fallen while Bernice was eating dinner.

The light had bled from the clouds until there was just a dull red glow that was gone in a few moments. The *Express* sped on, the brilliant beams of its headlamps illuminating the silver ribbon of track.

Relaxing in the comfort of the upper lounge afterwards, Bernice drank steadily, played cards erratically and chatted inconsequentially. She began to attach names to a few faces.

The middle-aged tourist couple were Warwick and Ellyn Verson. The little gnome-like red alien was Lorrix Wilver. The man who had given her the penetrating look at lunch was Garv Ferlane, who she thought might be worth getting to know better. Both Lankril and father and daughter Sommers were absent, but the grizzled man in the loud suit she had seen at lunch put in an appearance with a different but equally beautiful escort, together with a large blocky man whose build suggested he had been assembled rather than grown. Even as Bernice looked at the oddly matched trio with interest, she found Costermann by her side wearing a look of

disapproval. She wasn't sure if it was directed at the other passengers or herself. Had she disappointed Costermann by allowing him to see the less formal side of here nature?

'Who are they?' she asked, trying to sound alert.

'The older man is Montague Klemp. I imagine you can guess the functions of the other two. I said there was little crime on Tempest, Professor, but it's rumoured that Klemp controls a large proportion of what there is.'

'Only rumoured?'

'He tends to discourage closer inspection into his private life.'

Klemp, however, seemed bent on innocent enough pleasures, and Costermann evidently did not let his presence dampen his own enthusiasm for long. Bernice guessed he was more relieved than he admitted about the prospect of ridding himself of the Imnulate. He talked freely with everyone, except Klemp, and she saw him disappear once or twice with small groups in tow; presumably to show off his prize possession.

At around midnight Bernice found her time sense was slipping, and names and faces began to blur at the edges. Catching herself before she slid under the table, she made her excuses to those indeterminate few who remained in the lounge and cautiously negotiated her way down the stairs and along the corridor, swaying rather more than the motion of the *Express* actually necessitated. For safety reasons she could not at that moment recall, the pairs of coupler module doors between the cars no longer opened automatically as they had earlier, and she stared at them briefly in woolly minded bafflement before locating the manual switch. Finally reaching her compartment she just managed to make it to the bed in time to topple gently over into blissful unconsciousness.

She woke in the small hours to find herself sprawled face down on her bed still fully dressed. Slivers of artificial light from outside penetrated the window blinds, and she realized



the train was not moving. They must have reached Spume Lake, she thought hazily. Half asleep she blundered about her washroom, changed into her night clothes and collapsed into bed again, dimly aware as she did so of passengers and containers being unloaded from the cars at the rear of the train. She was asleep again before they drew out of the station.

The next time she woke the coppery light of morning was shining through the blinds. The days on Tempest were definitely not long enough to recover from the night before, she decided muzzily, clutching her pounding head with both hands to prevent it detaching itself from her shoulders. Slowly she became aware of the noise that had woken her. The train was running smoothly, but there were raised and excited voices in the corridor outside, interspersed with the sound of running feet.

She squinted at her bedside clock through bloodshot eyes. Oh.35 - and they started serving breakfast at 07.00 local time. She groaned at the thought of food. But why were the others being so noisy about it? Had they no consideration for their less robust fellows?

Muttering darkly she hauled herself out of the tangle of bedclothes, put on her robe, after some difficulty in finding the armholes, and opened the door. The corridor was half full of confused figures, some dressed, others still in night clothes.

'What the hell's going on?' she demanded, rubbing her eyes.

Nobody took any notice. She grabbed hold of the nearest convenient arm, which belonged to a man who she vaguely recalled from the night before was named Terbery. He was as white as a sheet.

'What's happening?' she asked again, raising her voice over the commotion.

'Murder,' he said simply. 'There's been a murder... and the Drell Immulate's missing!'

## MURDER ON THE *POLAR EXPRESS*

Bernice pushed through the confused throng in the corridor, kicking aside a confused 'server unit, even as the annoying little voice inside her head was reminding her that this was not her responsibility. But she was hung over and angry and in no mood to listen to reasonable voices, even her own. She wasn't impelled by morbid curiosity or even a sudden noble desire for justice; she wasn't thinking clearly enough for that yet. It was simply that she'd been woken up about three hours too early and she wanted to know who to blame.

You'll regret it, her inner voice said, metaphorically turning its back and throwing up its hands in disgust as she climbed the tight spiral stairs to Costermann's stateroom. Why don't you go away and find some black coffee, she told it. She hauled herself up the last few steps by the handrail and then paused on the tiny landing to allow the purple spots to clear from her eyes and the train to stop spinning.

The stateroom main door was open. Through it she could see most of Costermann's lounge.

Chief Steward Bassit was standing just inside with his back half to her. His head hung as though in disbelief and his immaculate uniform jacket was slightly awry. In the centre of the room a large body, unmistakably that of Tralbet, lay sprawled face down and very still. A slim knife handle protruded from his back, seeming to grow out of the centre of a patch of dark blood that stained the white of his shirt. The sight made Bernice's morning-after stomach tighten dangerously, and she hastily looked aside. Close by lay a second body, partially obscured at that moment by the white-smocked form of a Wrexian who was kneeling beside it, a black medical bag by his side. The alien doctor shifted

position, holding a hypodermic in his long many-jointed fingers, and Bernice saw the body was that of Costermann.

He was wearing silk pyjamas, and lay in a contorted fashion with one arm outstretched, his extended hand lying at the foot of the small table on which the MaxSec case had been resting. Bernice raised her eyes, trying to rub the last of the night sand from them and focus properly. The case was still there. Its side was open and lights were flashing serenely on its instrument modules. But the transparent inner box which had contained the Imnulate was quite empty.

The Wrexian closed his medical bag and stood up.

‘Is he dead too?’ Bernice asked, wincing at the sound of her own voice reverberating inside her skull.

The Wrexian turned his smooth pale face to her, high wise brows arching over large wide-spaced eyes. ‘No. He’s been drugged but his condition is stable and he should recover. Now please return to your compartment. Mr Bassit, can’t you keep control of the passengers?’

‘Sorry, Doctor?’ Bassit still looked stunned.

‘If you don’t want to be disturbed you’d better put somebody on guard at the foot of the stairs, or else everybody will be up here in a minute,’ Bernice suggested impatiently, pinching the bridge of her nose. Why did people have to commit crimes so early in the morning?

Bassit made an effort to gather himself. ‘Yes. Of course I must. Sorry, Professor Summerfield. I’m not thinking. Nothing like this has happened in twenty years.’

‘And who are you?’ she asked the Wrexian.

‘Pell: company doctor on the *Express*.’

‘Haven’t you got any trained security staff on board?’

‘What? No. There’s never been any need...’

‘I know: not for twenty years.’ She sighed, feeling a certain inevitability about events overtaking her and the chances of a quiet few days’ rest were receding moment by moment. Now was the time to withdraw before her curiosity got the better of her. ‘Well, I’m sure you’ll make out OK anyway, so I’ll be going...’

Just then another figure pushed past Bernice into the room. It was Garv Ferlane of the penetrating gaze. His flaxen hair was tousled and his shirt was still half fastened. His intense eyes widened as they took in the bodies and the empty MaxSec case.

‘Sir, please return to your compartment,’ said Bassit firmly, beginning to sound a little more composed.

Ferlane ignored him, glancing at Bernice suspiciously, his wide mouth forming a straight pinched line. ‘You’re Summerfield, aren’t you? What are you doing here?’

‘Being inquisitive and engagingly officious. It comes naturally. What’s your excuse?’

Ferlane held out his wallet so they could all see it, flashing it rectangle of plastic that flickered with a complex scrolled pattern and lines of type. ‘I work for Challis and Lyne. We’re insuring the Imnulate in transit.’

‘Costermann didn’t mention you,’ said Bernice.

‘He wasn’t told I’d be on board,’ he said tersely; ‘additional security.’ He glanced about the compartment, running his fingers through his hair, then frowning at Bernice again. ‘What do you know about this? Were you a friend of Costermann’s?’

Bernice sighed. ‘A recent acquaintance. And I still am, for what it’s worth. According to Dr Pell here, he’s drugged, not dead.’

Ferlane looked at Costermann then Pell, who nodded. Ferlane seemed relieved. ‘Well, that’s something, I suppose.’ He picked his way round Tralbet’s corpse to the security case. Cautiously he punched a couple of buttons, peered at a display panel and cursed. ‘According to this the Imnulate is still inside... but these things are meant to be foolproof!’

‘So I gathered from Costermann when he showed it off yesterday,’ said Bernice. ‘I think he did the same for about half the passengers last night as well, though I must admit I wasn’t paying that much attention by then.’

‘He did,’ Ferlane confirmed angrily. ‘But I didn’t realize it until it was too late. So I thought I’d better keep my cover

and hope it would discourage anyone making a try for the Imnulate. And now this!

'Tough luck,' Bernice commiserated. 'Anyway, if you're volunteering to take charge, be my guest. I've played detective before and believe me it's harder than it looks. Now I've got an appointment with a bed and a headache pill -'

'At least he can't have taken it far,' Ferlane muttered.

Bernice had half turned for the stairs, but found she had to turn back to ask: 'Who's "he"?''

'Somebody I've had my eye on. Thought I recognized his I face from a rogues' gallery I'd seen a while back. I was going to have my company check him out with the police this morning. Now I'd better go straight to his compartment and-'

'Excuse me, Mr Ferlane,' Bassit interjected. 'But you have no authority here to take any such action purely on your unsubstantiated suspicions. I must contact TGR head office in Thule to let them know what's happened and ask for instructions. You must be patient until then.'

Ferlane looked anything but patient, and his jaw set defiantly. 'I know my duty.'

'If whoever you've got in mind is still on the train, then they're not going anywhere for the moment,' Bernice assured him. Reluctantly she felt her brain shift out of first gear and finally gave in to curiosity. 'But suppose whoever did it got off at Spume Lake last night?' She looked about her. 'No convenient broken clocks or watches to help us pin down the time.' She glanced at Tralbet's still form, then at Pell. 'Can you say how long he's been dead?'

'Not precisely. Somewhere between one and two thirty a.m. I would estimate as a first approximation.'

'We stopped at Spume Lake at two fifty-five,' Bassit volunteered.

Ferlane sighed. He looked at Costermann again. 'How long before he comes round?'

'Some hours, I suspect,' said Pell. 'As long as he is comfortable, I would not like to risk hurrying the process with stimulants. I shall have him moved to the sickbay

shortly, but otherwise it would be best to let it wear off naturally.'

'All right. Get your company to contact the Spume Lake authorities and have them check on everyone who left the train there. And they'd better examine the freight too. Then seal this room. Let's not make the forensic investigator's job any more complex than it already is.' He squatted down and peered at the knife blade protruding from Tralbet's back. 'Any idea where this thing came from?'

'There I should think,' said Bernice automatically, pointing to the antique desk set on the bureau. 'The sheath mounted on the base is empty and the decoration on the handle matches the rest of the set.'

'But what is the knife's purpose?' Pell asked.

'It's a letter opener,' Bernice explained. 'Used before tear-seal strips. You don't see many of them nowadays.'

'Thanks, but it doesn't help us much if whoever did it picked it up in here,' said Ferlane. 'I suppose you've got a cold box you can store him in?' he asked Pell. 'Can you find out as much as you can before you chill him off?'

'I am acquainted with the theory well enough to make a more precise estimate about time of death, if that's what you mean,' Pell assured him. 'And I will naturally take care not to contaminate his clothes or the knife.'

'Has anybody thought what to tell the passengers?' Bernice asked. 'The news is already out, so you'd better make some sort of official announcement before the rumours blow it out of all proportion and they start panicking.'

'Yes, of course,' said Bassit, his face falling once again. 'They will have to be told. But how can I admit that there may be a killer at large on the train?'

'I think,' said Bernice, 'you may have to be judicious with the truth.'

In the Tourist and Economy Class carriages, a confused version of the night's tragedy was already spreading along the queue of passengers collecting their breakfast trays from the

dispenser. Then the *Express's* public-address system came to life.

'Your attention, please. This is Chief Steward Bassit. I have an important announcement to make.'

The murmur died away, as all eyes turned to the speakers mounted beside the progress display panels.

'As some of you may already know, a valuable item of property was stolen from one of the First Class staterooms last night. Sadly, during the commission of the crime, a passenger was also killed.' Bassit paused to let the renewed buzz of alarm die down again, then continued. 'The proper authorities in Thule have been informed and are taking appropriate steps to deal with the matter. Meanwhile it is likely that the person, or persons, responsible for the crime left the train at Spume Lake. Therefore there is no need for any further alarm or anxiety. Naturally, however, it may become necessary at some point to question passengers as a matter of routine. Trans-Global Railways regrets any delay this may cause, and asks that you co-operate fully with its staff and other officials in minimizing any inconvenience.

'We will keep you informed as to any further developments.

'Thank you for your attention.'

As the queue dissolved into a babble of excited voices one woman, whose ticket said her name was Lyn Masco, remained silent. Her face was expressionless, but the knuckles of her hand were white where she clutched her tray.

'Are you all right?' the woman standing next to her asked solicitously.

'What? Sorry. It's... just a bit of a shock.'

'I know! I've heard nothing like it for years. I don't know what Tempest's coming to. I blame all these foreigners.' She looked at Lyn suspiciously. 'You're from off-planet, aren't you?'

'Only from the outer belt. Just having a short holiday.' She made a wry face. 'I didn't know it would involve murder.'

Her companion evidently decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. 'Don't you worry about it,' she said reassuringly. 'You heard what they said: he's probably long gone by now.'

'Yes. I... hope so.'

Bernice found the *Express's* sickbay to be compact but very comprehensively equipped. Since trains on Tempest had been known to be delayed by adverse weather conditions for several days, this was understandable. It was probably for the same reason that they had a Wrexian resident doctor. Wrexians made some of the best physicians in the sector, and Tempest obviously wanted the best.

In the hour since the discovery of the crime. Pell had completed his examination of Tralbet and his body had been safely stowed away. Costermann was hooked up to biosensor monitors and was sleeping peacefully in one of the sickbay beds. Pell had also given Bernice a detoxification pill, but only on condition that she also submit to a general check-up.

'I recommend you reduce your alcoholic intake. Professor,' Pell advised her, frowning at the readings on his medical scanner. 'In many respects your state of health gives me more cause for concern than that of the late Mr Tralbet.'

Except that I haven't got a knife sticking in my back. I think that puts me ahead on points.'

'With that minor proviso, he was a remarkably fit individual. He evidently did not abuse his system.'

'Maybe if he had he would have been sound asleep and not disturbed the thief. Any better idea when he died yet?'

'Between one thirty and two fifteen. I do not believe anybody could be more precise in the circumstances.'

There was a knock on the door and Bassit entered, followed a moment later by Ferlane who looked eager and impatient.

'Well?' Ferlane demanded of Bassit.

'I thought I should inform the doctor first, Mr Ferlane,' Bassit said imperturbably, 'that we have received a reply from head office. They are consulting with the police over the matter of the crime and how best to get a proper investigation team to us as speedily as possible. Meanwhile they have



given permission for Mr Ferlane to detain his suspect, as long as he is monitored by company staff.'

'About time!' Ferlane exclaimed. 'He's still in his cabin. Come on.'

Bassit looked uncomfortable. 'And just in case there is any... trouble, I thought you should be prepared, Doctor.'

'I shall stand by, Mr Bassit.' Pell looked at Ferlane. 'Are you armed?'

Ferlane drew a slim handgun from a shoulder holster concealed under his jerkin. 'Small calibre. It won't blow out your train windows if that's what's worrying you.'

'I am more concerned about the damage it will do to - who is it you suspect?'

'Colton Terbery. Not that that's his real name.'

'Terbery?' Bernice exclaimed. 'I remember seeing him this morning. He didn't look as though he'd just committed theft and murder. In fact he looked genuinely frightened and bewildered by the whole thing.'

'Well then, he won't mind having his compartment searched, will he?' Ferlane turned to Bassit. 'As soon as you're ready.'

'Mind if I come along?' Bernice asked, surprised to find her tongue taking the initiative without informing her brain.

'It might get rough,' Ferlane warned.

'On a personal danger scale I passed "rough" years ago. Since then I've gone through "perilous", "suicidally insane" all the way up to "imminent galactic catastrophe". So "rough" doesn't bother me.' Ferlane noted the serious undertone to her banter and looked intrigued, as though reappraising her. Bernice smiled and shrugged. 'It's a long story.'

'Nevertheless, I'm afraid the company cannot allow its passengers to expose themselves to avoidable risks,' Bassit said formally.

'Look, I'll sign a waiver absolving you of any liability if you want. But I don't think Terbery did it.'

'OK,' said Ferlane impatiently. 'Let's find out, shall we?'

Terbery's compartment was empty of both Terbery, the Imnulate or any other incriminating evidence, much to Ferlane's annoyance.

'He must have just left. I was watching his door only five minutes ago.'

'Perhaps he's gone to breakfast,' Bernice suggested.

As Ferlane led them out of the compartment and looked angrily up and down, the small black-suited figure of Lorrix Wilver emerged from his room a little way along the corridor, umbrella as usual hooked over his arm. He tipped his bowler hat politely.

'Good morning, lady and gentlemen. This is most distressing news about poor Mr Costermann's servant, is it not?'

'Have you seen Mr Terbery this morning, Mr Wilver?' Bassit asked.

'Why yes. I saw him pass by just a recent moment ago.'

'Which way?'

'He was heading towards the rear carriages.'

'Did he seem in a hurry?' Bernice asked.

'He was moving with haste and, so far as I can appraise human expressions, in a state of some preoccupation,' Wilver said.

'Was he carrying anything?' Ferlane asked.

'Indeed, there was I believe a package under his arm.'

Ferlane glanced significantly at Bernice who shrugged: 'OK, so maybe I was wrong.'

'Alert the stewards in the other carriages to watch out for him,' Ferlane told Bassit. 'But they're not to interfere until we get there.'

Bassit touched the intercom button on his lapel and spoke urgently.

'You seem greatly to be interested in Mr Terbery's whereabouts. Is the package he was carrying of significance?' Wilver asked.

But he was addressing their backs as Ferlane, Bassit and Bernice were already heading down the corridor.

‘Just stay in your compartment, Mr Wilver,’ Bassit called over his shoulder. ‘Everything is under control.’

‘Regrettably that will not suffice. Not at all,’ Wilver muttered. And he scuttled after them.

Lyn Masco looked up just as Terbery passed through the open section of her carriage at a walk that verged upon a run. His face was set and unnaturally expressionless. Under his arm was a package she recognized. She opened her mouth to speak, but froze in silence at the look he flashed her.

*Be quiet! Ignore me!* was the silent message.

Then he <sup>was</sup> gone through the rear connecting door.

‘He was in a hurry,’ remarked one of her travelling companions. ‘From First Class, wasn’t he?’

‘I hadn’t noticed,’ said Lyn, dropping her head to her book once more to conceal her confusion.

Half a minute later three more figures dashed through the carriage. One was a steward. Not far behind them was an odd little alien man. They also disappeared through the rear door.

‘It’s almost as though they’re chasing him.’ The woman’s eyes widened. ‘You don’t suppose -’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ Lyn snapped.

They were eventually stopped in a coupler module by the further door that refused to open automatically or with the manual control. The floor of the module trembled slightly with the motion of the train, and Bernice could hear a faint rush of air from outside, but there was no sound from beyond the door.

‘What’s on the other side?’ Ferlane demanded.

‘Freight Car 1,’ Bassit said. ‘Light items, post and miscellaneous goods.’

‘Manned?’

‘Not at the moment. Most of the work is done by automated handlers -’

A two-tone siren sounded faintly from the other side of the doors. Immediately, a deep humming pulsed through the

body of the train, and Bernice felt her feet sliding from under her as she was pushed against the forward end of the coupler module.

Bassit's lapel button beeped.

'Yorland here, Mr Bassit,' came the voice from the tiny speaker. 'The atmosphere alarm shows an external service hatch in Freight 1 has just opened. Emergency stop has been initiated.'

'Either Terbery's got out himself or he's disposed of whatever he was carrying,' Ferlane snapped, bracing himself against the deceleration and trying to slide the baggage car door open. 'No use - it's jammed tight.'

'If Terbery went outside he couldn't last half a minute,' Bernice pointed out.

'Then he was disposing of something - or he had an atmosphere suit in that pack,' Ferlane retorted.

'But the fall would still have killed him.'

'Maybe he decided to risk it.'

The *Express* came to a halt just as Yorland's voice issued from Bassit's lapel intercom again: 'The hatch is now closed, Mr Bassit.'

'Listen!' said Bernice.

There was a slight scrape from the other side of the door, then silence. Motioning the others back and standing aside himself, Ferlane drew his gun and tried the manual button. The door opened easily, revealing a section of dimly lit interior filled with mesh racks and shelves containing assorted packets and parcels. There was a sharp tang in the air which caught in their throats, reminding Bernice of chemical cleaners and bad eggs but which in fact must have been a whiff of native air. But there was no sign of Terbery.

'Listen, Terbery,' Ferlane called out. 'My name's Garv Ferlane. I work for the company that insured the Immolate. I'm armed, but I'd rather not have to shoot you. You've got nowhere else to go, so why not just give yourself up and save us all a lot of grief?'

There was no reply.

‘Could he have got out and closed the hatch from the outside?’ Bernice whispered to Bassit.

‘It may be possible... I’m not sure.’

‘Don’t play games, Terbery,’ Ferlane said. There was still no response. Cautiously Ferlane stepped inside the door, swinging his gun around to cover the shadows. Bernice and Bassit followed him in, spreading out and peering down the aisles between the parcel racks. The further half of the carriage was hidden from view behind baggage-handling machinery.

They had gone just a few metres when there was a crash from behind them. Ferlane spun round in time to receive a shower of small parcels in the face. Bernice had an impression of a shadowy figure tumbling off a high shelf, landing lightly on the floor and darting back out through the door. With an angry shout Ferlane sprinted after it, Bernice and Bassit at his heels.

They burst through the second doorway into the adjoining passenger carriage and halted abruptly, surprised by the sight that met their eyes.

Terbery was lying on his back on the floor halfway along the corridor, squirming and kicking. Hooked neatly round his right ankle, keeping his leg awkwardly extended, was the handle of Wilver’s umbrella. And however Terbery twisted about, the little alien turned the shaft of his umbrella to keep him trapped.

‘Please do not struggle, Mr Terbery,’ Wilver said. ‘This is unseemly. Where is the Imnulate?’

‘Don’t worry, we’ve got a fairly good idea,’ said Ferlane.

‘That is good,’ said Wilver. ‘I dislike untidiness.’

‘I’m making a citizen’s arrest,’ Ferlane said, reaching down and grasping Terbery by his collar, ‘for robbery and murder!’

## SUSPECT

A white-water river seethed through the boulder-strewn gorge and under the single-span bridge of the monorail track. On the bridge the *Polar Express* rested motionless, only trembling occasionally under the erratic lash of the wind. From its windows the passengers could look down on narrow shingle beaches running along either side of the river. These were dotted with several starfish-like forms a metre and a half across, with inward curling arms like thick leaves. The starfish remained absolutely motionless and from a distance it was uncertain whether they were plant or animal. In this state their entertainment value was strictly limited, but several parents pointed them out to their children in an attempt to divert their uncomfortable questions about events inside the train. Then somebody spotted a shoal of glittering silver forms making their way along the translucent river shallows, and these were also brought to the children's notice with much praise in the hope of sustaining their interest a little longer.

As they watched, several of them passed close to the bank next to a group of the starfish things.

In a blur of motion the arms of the starfish nearest the water uncoiled to three times their apparent length, revealing barbed spines bristling along the last metre of their length and about their tips. These lashed across the water like whips, then re-coiled, carrying with them half a dozen of the silver-finned forms impaled on their barbs. Hungry needle-tooth cavities opened up in the tops of the predators' bodies, ready to receive their still squirming prey. The children gasped in horrified delight and pressed their faces against the

windows, oblivious to their parents' sudden loss of interest in the wonders of nature.

Then the *Express* slowly began to reverse along the track. As the gorge and its denizens vanished into the haze, several children started to protest loudly.

The environment suit store in Service Car 1 stank.

Ferlane chuckled as he saw Bernice wrinkle up her nose. 'However well they're cleaned each time, they always carry a whiff of the outside air with them. Now you know why they don't store suits in the living compartments.'

'But what if a compartment's holed?'

'Emergency helmets drop down automatically from traps in the ceiling. They'd keep you going long enough to get to the full suits. There was a briefing on them a few hours after we set out, don't you remember?'

'I... er, must have been asleep. Heavy lunch, you know.'

He looked at her doubtfully. 'You sure you want to come out? We may be some time.'

'I have full environment suit rating: zero to plus one hundred atmospheres, and I've clambered around on some pretty weird worlds, believe me. Everyone else is busy, and it'll be quicker if two of us are looking.' She sighed. 'Besides, it's too late now. I've got involved. I want to find whatever Terbery threw out just as much as you.'

Ferlane grinned. That I understand.'

Being a native of Tempest, Ferlane had his own personal name-tagged suit in the racks. Bernice found one from the general store and adjusted its fastenings to fit her. It was not a full pressure suit, but a reinforced airtight thermal controlled coverall, working at a slight overpressure to reduce the chances of contamination by external air in the event of any loss of integrity. It came with a twelve-hour endurance backpack supplying air, power and communications. Bernice carefully checked it was fully charged before strapping it on. When she finished sealing herself in she experimentally pressurized her suit. It ballooned slightly, but otherwise felt quite comfortable.

She saw Ferlane remove a gun holster from a small personal locker and strap it on over his suit to carry his own pistol.

‘Expecting trouble?’ she asked.

‘You can never tell on Tempest. There are things out there that can eat you whole.’

‘I’ll be careful. Does everybody carry guns here? I didn’t notice them in Carlsbad.’

‘Usually you don’t wear them unless you’re going outside, but I should think half the population have licences. A legacy of the old pioneering days.’

She felt the train slow to a stop again, and knew they were now at the spot where the instrument records showed Terbery had first opened the baggage car hatch. It had only been open for ten seconds, but the *Express* had been travelling at 150 kph at the time, which according to Bernice’s calculations meant they had a swathe of ground over 400 metres long and perhaps 50 wide to search. And that was assuming the package had not bounced unpredictably or been carried along by the wind.

The stocky figure of Yorland, the *Express*’s chief engineer, was waiting by the service car airlock, which was built into the body of the car and operated independently of the coupler module locks. Yorland was also suited but had his helmet visor opened.

‘When we’ve finished checking the baggage car hatch isn’t damaged, we’ll come out and give you a hand. I don’t want to be held up here any longer than we must.’

‘I thought people were used to the trains being delayed on Tempest,’ Bernice said.

‘Not when we might have a killer on board,’ Yorland replied tersely.

They entered the airlock and closed the inner door. Yorland closed his visor then operated the controls. The outer hatch opened, lifting out and folding to one side on parallel motion hinges so that it remained close to the hull and still half overlapped the airlock, providing a partial shield from the outside wind, which swirled into the chamber scouring out



the corners. A ladder mounted on the inside of the hatch extended. It was formed of rigid tubular telescopic sections, each fitted with hoops supporting a flexible mesh sheath which acted as a safety net and windbreak. Ferlane started down it and Bernice followed.

As she cleared the airlock Bernice heard the voice of Tempest's wilderness for the first time, no longer muted by any insulation except her helmet. It was born of the wind and the throaty rumble of distant thunder reflected off numerous cliffs and valleys rising from a muttering reverberation to an insidious whisper, then from a thin and tremulous howl to a groaning roar, only to fade again but never quite die away. It was an eerie and not altogether comfortable sound.

The track was raised on pylons six metres from the ground. As she descended Bernice glimpsed a riot of rocks fading into the ochre haze, sand-blasted into strangely sculptural shapes and softened by heaps of detritus that gathered in their lees. Here and there were splashes of colour formed by fungi trees with their rigid plates that mimicked leaf-covered branches, and a few low flapping ribbon plants.

Ferlane reached the ground and a moment later Bernice had joined him, leaning into the wind to keep her balance, its steady force drumming against her helmet. She was conscious of having set foot on the true surface of Tempest for the first time in almost two weeks on the planet.

'Lucky Terbery dropped his package when he did,' Ferlane said over the suit radio, a noticeable hiss and crackle accompanying his words even though he was standing beside her. 'A few seconds later and it might have gone into that river.'

'At least we know which side of the train it was,' Bernice said.

'All right, we'd better make a start, before the wind covers it with dirt. Don't lose sight of the track or wander off. Remember radio only works here over a kilometre or so at best. Sometimes reception gets washed out altogether if there's a big storm near by.'

Ferlane moved about ten metres off and away from the line of the monorail track. Keeping parallel with it they began their search.

Bernice shuffled along, head bent down, prodding any likely looking object with the toe of her boot. According to Wilver, the package Terbery had been carrying had been a fluorescent orange. Normally that would have made it highly conspicuous, but unfortunately the dominant soil colour at the point he dropped it seemed to be a reddish-brown. How soon would it be grimed over and become indistinguishable from all the other similar-sized rocks that littered the ground? As she proceeded she noticed that even the smallest pebble collected a tail of sand and dust, that vanished when the wind changed direction. Tempest didn't lack topsoil, she thought; it just didn't stay in the same place for very long.

'Why did your people let Costermann carry the Imnulate himself when they could have sent a squad of guards along with it?' she asked Ferlane, her eyes still glued to the ground. His voice crackled back over the earphones.

'The low key approach seemed best, what with using a MaxSec case and the isolation of the *Express*. You'd be surprised the number of valuables that get transported that way. Heavy security has its advantages, but it calls attention to itself. Too many of the wrong people see it as a challenge. Even so, Costermann was escorted discreetly through Carlsbad until he boarded, and there is an even heavier escort waiting in Thule. But nobody seriously thought anybody would try anything during the trip itself. Even when he started showing off the Imnulate to the other passengers, I was angry on principle rather than seriously worried. I should have known you can never trust anything on Tempest.'

As if to emphasize his words a fiercely driven wall of rain boiled out of the tan-tinted air without warning, hissing and splattering off Bernice's suit. She staggered under its impact, feeling subconsciously dampened even though the suit was perfectly watertight. In seconds the ground had turned to mud and the footing became treacherous. Her visor streamed

with water, fortunately running smoothly off its specially treated surface.

‘Are you OK?’ Ferlane asked. Though he could not have been more than twenty metres away from her he was quite invisible.

‘Fine. But I can hardly see a thing.’

‘Just stay put. It’ll probably only last a few minutes.’

He was correct. The sky brightened as the shadow of the downpour passed, and with it visibility improved almost magically in air temporarily washed clean of suspended dust. She saw Ferlane again, then the monorail track running clear to the horizon in either direction, while before her was revealed an unexpected razorbacked range of hills that rose up to the lowest cloud layer.

Then a flicker of motion caught her eye. A wet and dirt-streaked orange ball perhaps sixty centimetres across was bouncing and rolling in the wind a dozen paces from her, but strangely not moving beyond a very tight arc. For a moment she thought it might be some kind of native giant fungi, then she saw the cord fastening it to the ground.

‘Over here!’ she called out to Ferlane.

Ferlane splashed across through the mud puddles and together they bent down over her find.

‘Very clever,’ he acknowledged, turning the ball over. ‘Inflatable padding and a built-in explosive bolt to fasten it to the ground so that it wasn’t blown away.’ He unsnapped a knife from his belt, cut the securing cord and tucked the tough-skinned balloon under his arm. ‘Let’s get back inside. I want to see Terbery’s face when he sees we’ve found his stash.’

\* \* \*

Steam jets played over them as the airlock was purged of external air. As they came through the inner hatch, Ferlane was already stripping off his gloves and unsnapping his helmet. His face was suffused with a fierce glow of satisfaction.

‘We’ve got it,’ he announced cheerfully to Yorland. ‘You can get started again any time you want.’

He put the balloon on the floor and knelt down beside it, turning it over until he found a recessed toggle. With a hiss the inflatable padding deflated and the balloon split down the side. Eagerly he pulled the limp folds of fabric apart.

Then Bernice saw his jaw drop in surprise and peered over his shoulder.

'I said playing detective wasn't as easy as it looked,' she reminded him.

In Tourist Car A, Lyn Masco listened for some further announcement about Jordan Tyne. It had been almost an hour since he had been marched past her under guard back up the train from the goods car. A little later she'd seen Bernice and Ferlane conduct their search along the trackside and then return to the train. Any minute she expected them to come for her. But there was nowhere to run and nothing to do except await the inevitable.

The *Express's* sickbay was situated in Service Car 2, which lay between First Class B and Tourist A. Terbery had been locked up in one of the bay's two small isolation rooms with Bassit standing guard outside, much to Pell's annoyance.

'This is not a prison,' he complained to Bernice and Ferlane as they appeared carrying a shapeless orange bundle. 'Must I put up with this all the way to Thule?'

'Maybe not,' said Bernice, as Bassit unlocked the door of Terbery's makeshift cell.

Terbery had been sprawled dejectedly on the bed. but he sat up quickly as they entered. He took one look at the bundle Ferlane was carrying then turned his eyes aside.

Without a word, with Bassit looking on impassively, Ferlane emptied the contents of the balloon on to the bed.

There were transparent skin gloves, night-vision glasses, a gas mask and sleep gas capsule, a pack of delicate electronic burglary tools, a compact radio beacon... but no Imnulate.

Don't pretend they're not yours,' Ferlane said. 'You weren't wearing gloves when we caught you, so I'm betting you left some prints behind on these or the packing. Why not save

yourself and us a lot of time and trouble and just tell us where you hid the Immulate itself?’

Terbery said nothing.

‘Look,’ said Ferlane, in an effort to sound reasonable. ‘My company got a match on your description from the police in Thule. They just sent it through. You’re real name is Jordan Tyne, though you’ve gone by half a dozen other aliases in your time. You’re a card sharp and con-artist with a couple of convictions for jewel theft. The charade’s over.’

Terbery/Tyne remained silent. Ferlane pulled over a chair and sat facing him. ‘There’s nothing on your record about violence. I’m pretty sure you didn’t mean to kill Tralbet. I guess he didn’t go under the gas properly and disturbed you. You panicked, grabbed that fool knife from the set on the desk and stabbed him by reflex. Just admit what happened, tell us where you’ve put the Immulate and there’s a good chance you’ll get off with manslaughter.’

Tyne muttered something under his breath.

‘What was that?’ Ferlane asked.

‘I said you wouldn’t believe me if I told you!’ Tyne shouted suddenly, jerking upright to glare at his accuser then burying his face in his hands. ‘What’s the use! You think you’ve got it all figured out. But I’ll take a veracitor test when we get to Thule to prove I didn’t do it! I didn’t kill Tralbet and I didn’t steal the Immulate!’

Ferlane snorted in disbelief. ‘Veracitors can be fooled, as I’m sure you know.’

The same barely concealed expression of contempt was on Bassit’s face, as he stood stiffly with his back to the door. Bernice could see he would never forgive Tyne for disrupting the smooth running of his train, whether he was innocent or not of the greater crime.

Bernice pulled up another chair, settled herself in front of Tyne, and looked at him closely for the first time. He was a compact wiry man with close-cut faded sandy hair. His hands, she noticed, were very neat and white, with very clean smooth-trimmed nails. His eyes were bright and his movements quick, almost birdlike.

‘I’m Professor Bernice Summerfield,’ she said. ‘I was looking forward to taking it easy for a few days when all this blew up. Now I’ve got to stay uncomfortably sober and alert when I could be getting happily sozzled.’

‘What’s that to me?’ Tyne retorted.

‘Quite a lot, perhaps. I’m not a criminologist, I’m an archaeologist. But that does mean I’m used to poking around searching for the truth. Trying to put together a consistent whole from little fragments and make some sense out of the past. The same methods work for contemporary events. For instance: I picked up one piece of this particular puzzle this morning quite by chance. Remember when I came out of my compartment and asked you what had happened? You were totally unprepared for the question and looked genuinely amazed and deeply shocked when you replied. That wasn’t the face of a man who’d killed a few hours before. It was too natural. If you were that good you’d never have been caught and accumulated that record of yours. But then that doesn’t fit with the items we found in the bag you dumped, which you have to admit are pretty incriminating. Now help me make sense of these details so I can see how they fit the larger picture.’

Tyne looked at her with the first glimmerings of hope. ‘All right,’ he said with a slight shrug. ‘Why not? What do you want to know?’

‘If you’re as innocent as you say,’ Ferlane asked sharply, ‘why did you run earlier and try to dump your stuff?’

‘Why do you think? Because when what had happened sunk in, I knew there’d be somebody like you coming round searching everybody’s luggage. How was I going to explain my gear? I had to get rid of it!’

Bernice looked at him narrowly. ‘But I take it you brought it along for more than sentimental attachment? Were you planning to make an attempt on the Imnulate?’

Tyne nodded, a slightly manic grin spreading across his face. ‘Yeah. I was. Until somebody else beat me to it. But I get caught. Quite a joke.’

'You expect us to believe a coincidence like that?' said Ferlane.

'No. But if I've got the Innulate, Mr Clever Insurance Investigator, where is it? You've searched my compartment I guess. And why didn't I dump it with the rest of the gear if I had it with me?'

'Excuse me, Mr Ferlane,' Bassit interjected. 'But it occurs to me that he may have hidden the item in the baggage car while we were locked out, then disposed of the other items as a diversion.'

'Maybe. We'll check it out.'

'I didn't have the time to do any such thing,' Tyne said, 'but be my guest.'

'We will,' Ferlane promised him. 'Meanwhile, how did you find out the Innulate was being transported? It was meant to be secret.'

Tyne smiled mockingly. 'Well, somebody certainly knew about it and tried to do me a favour by passing it on. Huh! I'd like to do them one just the same! Look where it's got me. I should've stuck to what I know, but like a fool I thought this could be the big one! The retirement job - and to get in a little revenge at the same time.'

'What do you mean?' Bernice asked gently.

Tyne sighed in disgust. 'That's what makes it look worse for me. You see, a few years ago I bumped into Costermann... and I came off worst.'

'How?' Ferlane demanded.

M was working the card table on the interplanet liners, and was doing nicely for myself. Then I met Costermann on the *Solar Queen*. Got into a game with him and a few others who wouldn't miss losing a few shillings. I did pretty well too and took them all for a fair packet. Except I must have got careless, or else Costermann watched me working over somebody else and spotted a null move. He sent that big Narg of his round to my cabin the next night to give me a good beating, and then he took back everything I'd won off him. Of course I couldn't complain about what he'd done. I

had to sit quiet. But you can see why Costermann isn't one of my favourite people.'

'And now he's taken a big loss and the man who beat you up is dead,' Ferlane said.

Tyne clutched his head. 'I know how it looks!'

'But who told you about Costermann and the Immulate?'

'It was an anonymous letter that came by mail. Posted in Thule, that's all I know.'

'Have you got it with you?'

'That wouldn't have been too smart, would it? But I read it enough times to know it pretty much word for word.' He closed his eyes and spoke as though reciting from memory.

"You may be interested to learn that Nathan Costermann, resident of Carlsbad City, Tempest, will shortly be personally transporting his valuable Drell Immulate to Thule on..." and he gave the dates and times of the train, even the false name Costermann would book under "...for the purposes of sale. The Immulate will be in a secure container and well guarded, but this should not prove an obstacle to someone who is suitably prepared. I am in no position to take the revenge I would wish on Costermann, but I understand you have a similar grievance against him and possess certain skills I lack which may enable you to succeed. Good luck."

'And that was it. I checked up what I could and found the information was straight, worked out how I might pull the job off and set myself up to have a crack at it. Only it hasn't panned out quite the way I planned,' he added bitterly.

Bernice was thoughtfully silent for a few moments, then asked, 'What was your plan to steal the Immulate exactly? If we can get a professional's insight into the problem, so to speak, maybe we can work out how it was really done, and by whom.'

'You don't actually believe him?' Ferlane said.

'Actually I do. Go on, Mr Tyne.'

Tyne began to look more animated.

'Well, the first problem was finding out where it was being kept. Costermann made that easy by showing it off to everybody. I simply tagged along last night with a couple of



the others. He even let me touch the flipping thing! He didn't recognize me, of course; I didn't look quite like this when we last met. But that MaxSec case was as tough as he said. In fact it was more than I'd been expecting - the letter hadn't been too clear about that. Now, there are only three ways I know of to beat a MaxSec. One is to use twin heavy-duty laser cannons, or industrial debonders maybe, exactly synchronized and focused to vaporize the two control units simultaneously - making sure you don't shatter the holding box and its contents with the secondary blast and shockwaves as you go. The other is to negate the containment field itself with a counter field. But that would take a roomful of special equipment, and you'd still run the risk of triggering all the alarms and self-destruct sequence if you didn't get the counterphasing just right. The third is to somehow get into its computer core, bypassing all the code traps and key paths, and convince it to open up. But that might take hours or days, even for a top-level programmer, and it still might flip on you.

'Anyway I didn't have any of that sort of gear with me and probably wouldn't know how to use it if I had, and I'm no computer genius. I was stuck trying to work out how I could neutralize the case long enough to move it, so I could tackle it later when I had more time. But it was too big for the drop bag I'd brought. I'd checked up on the layout of these trains and found a small conveyer tube hatch in the cargo van that I knew I could open without triggering any alarms - of course I didn't have time to do it silently this morning.

'That was how I reckoned on beating the problem of getting the Imnulate off the train, you see: throw it and my gear out as soon as I could and have nothing incriminating on me. Then they could search as much as they liked. With any luck they'd probably decide somebody had taken it off at an earlier stop and start chasing ghosts. When the heat had died down I'd come back here to the closest station I could, rent a ground car and recover the package. By timing the drop I'd know to within a few kilometres where it would be, and the transmitter inside would guide me when I got close. It had a

timer in it so it wouldn't activate for a month, so nobody else would find it by chance. And that was it.'

'And the gas capsule?' Bernice wondered.

'To take out any guards, like the letter warned me.'

'Looks as though gas was used just that way,' Ferlane said.

'But you can see I never used it!'

'You might have brought two capsules with you.'

'But I didn't! Have the gloves examined. You'll see I never wore them.'

Ferlane scowled thoughtfully.

Bernice said, 'When we found the MaxSec case this morning it was completely undamaged, and the readouts showed the Imnulate hadn't been removed. Any idea how that could have been done?'

Tyne shook his head. 'Somebody much smarter than I am. If I could do that, I wouldn't be here now.\*

'Did you plan all this on your own?' Ferlane asked. 'You hadn't got a partner in on it?'

'No,' Tyne said firmly. 'I always work on my own. Check my record. You won't see anything about accomplices there.'

'I think that'll be all for the moment,' said Bernice, looking at Ferlane who nodded distractedly.

Outside the isolation room once more, Ferlane said, 'If Tyne could work out a way to get the Imnulate off the train, then somebody else might have done the same thing.' He turned to Bassit. 'You'd better get Yorland to check all the hatches the passengers might have had access to.'

'Very good, Mr Ferlane.'

'So you do think Tyne's innocent,' said Bernice.

'He's still the best suspect,' Ferlane said firmly, 'but I'm just covering every option.' He scowled. 'And nothing yet explains how the case systems were bypassed.'

'Somebody must have got the key code from your head office. Evidently the news had already got out about when the Imnulate was being transported. Perhaps it was down to the same source.'

'Except that even the correct code wouldn't do any good. The case had a three-day time-lock on it.'

‘You didn’t mention that before.’

‘Additional security measure. Even Costermann wasn’t told. Any attempt to remove the Innulate before then, even with the right code, would have triggered the alarms. And yet it’s gone. Somehow the system was completely bypassed.’

‘But if we believe Tyne, that would take either a computer genius with hours or days to spare, or else somebody with a mass of heavy specialized equipment that was smuggled on board without being noticed, then carried up and down to Costermann’s stateroom in the dead of night without disturbing anyone.’

‘I know,’ said Ferlane disconsolately. ‘The whole thing’s beginning to seem impossible.’

‘Improbable, maybe,’ Bernice gently corrected him, ‘but obviously not impossible. How Sherlock Holmes would have loved this one!’

Lorrix Wilvercame up to them while they were still debating in the corridor, raising his hat in his fastidiously polite manner.

‘Excuse me, lady and sirs. But has your examination of the man Terbery brought forth satisfaction? It is an untidy and undesirable circumstance to be in not to have justice done and the Drell idol restored to its proper place. There will be discommodious delays if this is not so, and I have a schedule to keep by way of my business.’

‘We are well aware of the inconvenience any delays would cause our passengers, Mr Wilver,’ said Bassit. ‘I can assure you we shall do everything in our power to resolve the matter before we reach Thule.’

‘But is not Terbery the killer-thief?’

‘We’re... still considering the matter,’ Ferlane said carefully. ‘But thanks again for stopping him the way you did.’ He nodded at Wilver’s umbrella. ‘Never thought of one of those things as being so handy in a tight corner.’

‘I am always prepared for the unexpected, Mr Ferlane,’ said Wilver seriously. ‘You will please keep me informed of developments?’ And he tipped his hat again and walked primly away.

Bernice realized Pell had emerged from his surgery and was looking on with distaste.

‘I see my rooms are becoming a regular police station,’ he said. ‘I will disturb anyone requiring genuine medical attention.’

‘Just be patient a little while longer, Doc,’ said Ferlane. ‘Sorry - no pun intended. Is there anything else you can tell us about Tralbet or Costermann? I take it he’s still out?’

‘He is. But I do have some further information that may be of use. I suppose you’d better come into my room.’

They made themselves as comfortable as possible in the small surgery. Pell consulted his notes.

‘I can say with some certainty that Tralbet was killed between one thirty and two fifteen by the single knife wound we all saw in his back. The blade passed cleanly between his ribs and punctured the major ventricle of his heart. Death would have followed very quickly.’

‘Pretty effective for a relatively blunt blade, even though it was long. A lucky blow or deliberately aimed?’ Ferlane asked.

‘Who can tell? The nature of the weapon does suggest improvisation, but that tells us little about the user’s knowledge.’

‘I’m surprised there weren’t more signs of a struggle,’ said Bernice. ‘Somebody of Tralbet’s size, even though dying, could have caused quite a lot of damage in a few seconds. His killer was close enough to stab him, and that lounge isn’t all that big. You’d think he would have made the attempt to get back at him - assuming it was a him - even by reflex.’

‘Ah, but he had already been weakened by the inhalation of the anaesthetic gas we already suspected,’ said Pell. ‘I was able to obtain traces from his lungs and bloodstream. I do not have the equipment to perform a complete chemical analysis, but I suspect it is a variety of fast-acting riot control agent known as SC-20, according to my medical database. Not normally available to the public, of course. I assume the civil or military authorities will know more about that sort of thing, though whether there are any stocks of it on Tempest I could not say.’

‘Why didn’t the gas put him right out?’ Ferlane asked. ‘Didn’t he get the full dose?’

‘I must do some more research into Narg physiology, but I believe he was by nature partially resistant to its effects. Mr Costermann inhaled the same gas which incapacitated him totally.’

‘Either way, it left the thief, or thieves, time enough to take the Immulate and get clean away with it - assuming Tyne isn’t

our man,' said Ferlane. He picked out the gas capsule they had recovered from Tyne's drop bag and handed it over to Pell. 'Tyne, or whoever sold it to him, erased all the markings. But can you check that this is the same gas? Just take care you don't trigger it.'

'I will take suitable precautions,' Pell assured him.

'Meanwhile,' said Ferlane, 'can you give us a couple of pairs of disposable medical gloves? I'm sure you've got some around here. I'd like to have a look at Costermann's room again, and I don't want to leave any fingerprints to confuse things.' He turned to Bassit. 'Who actually discovered the crime, by the way? If Tyne's not our man, it's time we started working methodically.'

'That was Lin, the night steward. But you surely don't suspect

'I'm sure he's perfectly innocent. But we should find out exactly what he saw. The police will be asking the same questions soon enough, so he might as well get the practice with us. Have him meet us in Costermann's room.'

'I shall bring him along personally, Mr Ferlane,' Bassit said. 'And I must insist on being present when you question him.'

'As you like.'

'Does this "we" and "us" you keep mentioning include yours truly?' Bernice asked Ferlane.

He raised an eyebrow. 'Unless you've got anything better to do, Professor. You seem to have some talent for this sort of thing, and you might be doing yourself a favour if you can help clear up this mess as soon as possible.'

'I'm meant to be having a few days' holiday,' she protested.

'But as you said, you've got involved,' Ferlane pointed out with a grin. 'And you're the sort who can't leave a puzzle unsolved. I can tell.'

Bernice sighed heavily. 'I know. This sort of thing's always happening to me. I think it's something genetic.'

Bassit was looking at them both intently. 'Excuse me. I will find Lin. And I must contact head office again.' He gave them the key to Costermann's room and left briskly.

Carrying the gloves they had obtained from Pell, they were passing through the coupler module to the A Car corridor when Bernice started at the sight of a large figure coming towards them. It turned off the corridor and climbed the spiral stairway leading up to the forward stateroom, disappearing with a dull thud of heavy feet.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Ferlane.

‘Phew! For a moment I thought it was Tralbet miraculously reincarnated.’

‘Oh, that’s Deek. Another Narg. One of Monty Klemp’s bodyguards.’

‘Oh yes: the Tempest Godfather.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘Costermann last night. He obviously didn’t think much of him.’ She frowned. ‘If Tyne’s out of the running, Klemp’s got to be a possibility.’

‘I can’t believe he’d be stupid enough to rob the man he’s travelling next door to.’

‘Unless that’s exactly what he wants us to think? For that matter, if it’s not Tyne, it could be almost anybody else on the train.’

‘That’s about two hundred and fifty people!’ Ferlane exclaimed. ‘I hope we can narrow it down a bit.’

‘Well, say anybody in this carriage. Unless we had a stowaway on board.’

‘Now you’re getting melodramatic, Prof.’

‘I think this whole business is verging on the melodramatic.’ She looked through the armourglass panel in the module’s outer door at the half-lit jagged landscape sliding by. Lightning briefly flashed over the lowering sky. ‘We’ve certainly got the right setting for it.’

Before entering the lounge of Costermann’s suite, Ferlane stopped in the doorway itself. With a small pocket torch he examined the jamb, particularly about the lock plate.

‘Look here,’ he said. A tiny shred of silver foil was pressed into the back of the latch recess. ‘Old trick, but it still works with some door locks. A piece of foil-wrapped card slipped in

there stops the spring latch from sinking in all the way, but completes the circuit so that it shows locked on the indicator. Anybody could have made up something like this in two minutes and pushed it into place as they passed through. Then the door would practically open at a touch when they came back later. Leave it for the forensic team. But let them know we spotted it first.'

They stepped into the lounge.

The MaxSec case still stood gaping and empty on its table, its operating lights flashing their futile reassurance. Engineering tape outlined the spot where Tralbet's body had lain.

'Who did this?' Bernice asked.

'Pell. He also arranged for photographs of the scene before they moved anything. He's sharp. I would have had a proper look round then, but I wanted to keep an eye on Terbery.'

'Well, you're the nearest thing to an expert here. What are we looking for?'

'Nothing, maybe. If it was well planned, there won't be any clues lying about. No torn buttons or careless footprints. And as about half the train must have tramped through here last night while Costermann showed the Immulate off, even if one of them was responsible it'll be the devil's own job to prove it.'

'Ah, but the crime wasn't perfectly planned, was it?' Bernice pointed out. 'The thief used the wrong sort of gas and Tralbet interfered. He, or she, didn't have a weapon, or at least didn't have time to use it -'

'Or it wasn't silenced so it couldn't be used because it would raise the alarm.'

'Possibly. Anyway the thief grabbed the nearest weapon, the handy and traditional paperknife, and stabbed him.'

Ferlane examined the desk set for himself, fingering the empty sheath. 'Looks that way. Is this Costermann's own set?'

'I believe it is, sir,' said Bassit from the door.

Bassit had Lin, the night steward, with him, looking a little pale. He was a neat youngish man, with a well-scrubbed look



and dignified air, which Bernice was coming to recognize in all the train staff.

‘Now, Lin,’ said Bassit. ‘Please tell Professor Summerfield and Mr Ferlane what happened this morning.’

‘Well,’ said Lin, ‘Mr Costermann had put in an order for an early breakfast in his room. It had gone up by the ‘server as usual, but it wasn’t collected or receipted as it should have been. After a few minutes the ‘server signalled it had a problem and I came up to sort it out, thinking it had probably just developed a fault or something. But when I got here I couldn’t get any reply. So I used my pass key -’ he paled again and there was Mr Costermann’s man lying on the floor, with the blood on his back, and Mr Costermann himself stretched out so still I thought he was dead as well. And that case sitting there empty with its lights flashing. We’d all heard about what was in it last night. And then I... panicked. I’ve never seen a dead body before. I didn’t think to call up help, I just ran down the stairs again.’ He looked unhappily at Bassit. ‘I think I may have barged into a passenger, Mr Bassit. And I must have said what had happened out loud... and then I pulled myself together a bit and called you. Sorry, Mr Bassit.’

‘That’s all right, Lin.’

‘Did you leave the door open when you ran downstairs?’ Bernice asked.

‘Uh... yes, I did. Professor.’

‘OK,’ said Ferlane. ‘Hang around for a minute in case we need to check anything with you.’

‘I have had news from TGR head office,’ Bassit said as they continued their examination. ‘We’ll be picking up a Proctor from Sirocco Flats, who will take official charge and collect preliminary statements. Meanwhile a full investigation team is being assembled at a larger station further down the line.’ He looked at Bernice and Ferlane intently. ‘However, until the police arrive, the Company has instructed me to give you every assistance in solving the crime, if that is possible.’

‘That’s very good of them,’ said Ferlane. ‘But why not wait for the professionals?’

'TGR has its reputation to consider, Mr Ferlane. It wishes to reduce to a minimum the delay and inconvenience to those of its passengers who have connections with star liners already booked, many of whom are important and influential people. If you can present the police with the solution, or at least eliminate some of the possible suspects, it would be greatly appreciated.'

Ferlane nodded. 'Well, we'll do our best.'

'But I'm an off-worlder,' Bernice protested. 'You don't know anything about me.'

'It is a question of who we can trust to investigate the crime. Professor,' Bassit explained. 'Mr Ferlane's company vouches for him, and his knowledge of the background to the affair makes his participation essential. And head office has already contacted your host in Carlsbad, Professor. Mr Galloway spoke well of you, and his word carries considerable influence on Tempest.'

'He did? It does?' Bernice realized she'd never asked what Galloway did outside the CAS. All she could think of in her favour was that she'd made him laugh once. 'I mean. . . that's good of him.'

'In addition,' Bassit said, colouring slightly. 'Dr Pell confirms, from the level and absorption rate of alcohol in your body, that you would have been too much the worse for drink at the time of the crime to have possibly participated.'

'Alibied by virtue of being drunk and incapable!' Bernice exclaimed. 'Now that's more like it!'

'OK. We'll do our best,' Ferlane said impatiently. 'Now, we've agreed what happened to Tralbet, what about Costermann?'

'He was probably already knocked out by the gas,' said Bernice. 'Maybe he was in his bedroom?'

They went through to Costermann's bedroom. The sheets were thrown back half over the floor and the bed and pillow were still dinted.

'They must have known it took his thumbprint to open the outer case,' said Bernice. 'That's why he was stretched out like that beside the table. He was carried over to it when he

was unconscious, because the case couldn't be moved to him without triggering the alarm.'

Ferlane was nodding. 'That's how I read it. But does it tell us anything?'

'That it couldn't have been done by anybody too weak to carry a full-grown man five or six metres, and then hold him up high enough to touch his thumb to the case lock.'

'Unless there were two of them.'

They returned to the lounge.

'Does everything in the room, apart from Tralbet and Costermann, look the same as when you entered this morning?' Ferlane asked Lin, who was still standing in the doorway.

'Uh... yes, sir. I think so.'

'Did you touch anything at all?'

'No, sir. Nothing.'

'Were the room lights on or off when you first came in?'

'Er, off, sir. But there was enough light filtering through the blinds to see by.'

'OK, you can go for the moment.'

Lin departed gratefully. Ferlane turned back to the scene of the crime. 'All right. The thief used sleep gas, probably a grenade or capsule -'

'Why didn't it activate the compartment's air monitor?' Bernice wondered.

'Good question. We'll ask Yorland. Anyway, the door had already been fixed to open easily. The thief opened it just wide enough to roll the gas capsule through. If it was a slow-release type it wouldn't make any noise, and even if Tralbet was in the room he might not notice it until it was too late. Now if it was a capsule, where would it have gone?'

'Perhaps the thief tidied it up?'

'Would he have had the presence of mind alter having just committed an unplanned murder?'

They got down on their hands and knees and peered under the furniture. In a minute Ferlane found a dark green spherical shell just under the edge of the couch.

'This looks like it. Better leave it there for the police. But I can tell it's a different type to the one Tyne had. I'm beginning to believe he's not our man.'

They searched the rest of the compartment but found nothing of note. Ferlane diligently checked the air vents, and confirmed with Bassit that there were no other means of access to the car's service ducts or conduits.

When they had done Bernice looked about moodily.

'I had a vague idea that the Immulate might be hidden in the suite somewhere, as it'd be the last place anybody would think of looking. Then when all the fuss was over, the thief could collect it again.'

'Nobody tries that sort of trick in real life,' Ferlane said.

'I know. Perhaps playing detectives is distorting my sense of reality.' She clutched her stomach and looked at her watch. 'Or maybe I'm simply light-headed from lack of food? It's nearly lunchtime - and I didn't even have breakfast!'

'We've about done here,' Ferlane said. 'Let's eat.'

Bassit cleared his throat deferentially. 'If you intend to use the dining car, I trust you will be discreet in your conversation? We do not wish to alarm the other passengers unduly.'

'Don't worry, we'll try not to talk shop,' Bernice assured him.

Bernice noticed the change in atmosphere as soon as she and Ferlane entered the dining car. There were several empty tables, implying some people had decided to eat in their compartments. The Versons and Clarris Sommers were among those absent, she noticed, though Denn Lankril was now present. The family from B Car were there, the young girl looking bright and normal, but the parents both rather more subdued. She noticed from their place card as she passed that their name was Astall. Conversations were being conducted in low voices, which trailed off notably as she and Ferlane entered. She walked down the aisle between the tables feeling as though every eye was following her.

To her surprise, the place cards now showed she and Ferlane were sharing the same table, with empty spaces on either side of them.

‘More of Bassit’s discretion, I assume,’ Bernice said quietly, taking her seat.

‘They know what we’re doing, that’s for sure,’ Ferlane observed, scanning the menu.

‘That was quick.’

‘They must have seen us searching outside earlier, and Wilver’s probably told them about our questioning Tyne.’

‘Then why do I suddenly feel excluded? They should be grateful somebody’s doing something positive.’

‘But we’re actually getting our hands dirty, and perhaps they feel some of it might rub off. If we go through with this thoroughly we might be searching their compartments before the day’s out. Detectives don’t make good company, especially in a roomful of potential suspects.’

Bernice glanced surreptitiously around at her fellow diners as the reality sank in.

She had uncovered numerous graves and signs of ancient crimes in her time, but now she was dealing with the living. Could one of them have done it? They were people she hardly knew; half-familiar faces with a few names tagged on. But she had a feeling she would get to know them a lot better before the journey was over.

An hour later they were seated beside Yorland in his engineering monitor room in Service 1. Ferlane asked if the compartment air monitors would have detected the knockout gas.

‘The monitors are attuned specifically to methane, ammonia, SO<sub>2</sub>; and CO<sub>2</sub>,’ Yorland explained. ‘Unless the gas used contained any of them, they wouldn’t react.’

‘Shouldn’t think it did. Scratch that idea. What have you found?’

‘The hatch Terbery, or Tyne or whatever he’s called, used in Freight 1 was for conveyor tubes carrying small non-modular packed goods. It was a good choice. As long as you have the

time to bypass the alarms it could probably be opened without causing too much disturbance.'

'Is that what's happened?' Bernice wondered. 'Did someone else use it first for the same purpose?'

'I don't think so. There were no tool marks on it or signs of tampering, and your man only had time to use the manual switch. There's a similar hatch in one of the other freight cars, but I've checked it out and it's not been used for at least the last two weeks. The other freight hatches are too big. They'd be damaged if they were opened while we were in motion, and they'd be spotted if it was done in a station. Anyway, I've put my own seals on them. If this idol thing is still on board nobody else'll be using them to get rid of it.'

'Any other hatches or doors that could be used the same way?' Ferlane asked.

'No. I've gone over the plans of the whole train. The regular coupler module doors are right out of the question, of course. Too well monitored and fail-safed. Still, I've loaded the visual records of First Class A coupler door use from last night. Thought they might be of use to you.'

'What records?' Bernice asked in surprise.

'There are monitors covering all car connecting doors. You're lucky regulations require them to be kept.'

'Why?' Bernice asked, and recalling the return trip to her room the previous night added: 'And why cut out the automatic door sensors?'

'In case of an accident. We must be able to see all the doors are clear and can be sealed. They can be viewed at any time, but we only record at night or unless an emergency stop has been triggered. That's why the auto systems are cut and people have to work the doors manually. We don't want them opening just because somebody fell against them, or people getting caught between cars in a panic.'

'I wish they showed the whole corridor and not just the doors,' said Ferlane. 'It's too much to hope that whoever did it was obliging enough to be caught on them, but it might cut down the suspects to the single carriage.'

Bernice said, 'Unless somebody from another carriage hid in Car A overnight, committed the crime, and returned after the monitor recording had stopped this morning.'

'Hide where? There are no empty compartments in A.'

Yorland frowned. 'There is the kennel.'

'Pardon?' said Bernice.

'The car's roboserver bay. It's discreet so you probably haven't noticed it. Lower end of the car, right of the door. It also houses some ancillary equipment.'

'Room enough for somebody to hide in?' Ferlane asked.

'Yes. But it's always locked.'

'Still, you'll check it out?'

'Sure.'

'It's just a thought. Let's see the picture show,'

The recording started at sunset, the exact hours, minutes and seconds being displayed with the images. The cameras were mounted up in the angle between wall and ceiling and almost invisible. They viewed the figures passing through the doors in the earlier part of the evening at a high-speed flicker, using a split screen to show both doors on the same monitor. At around midnight the passage through the doors began to thin as the passengers were all passing back through to their compartments from the restaurant car and lounge. Bernice watched her own unsteady progress with some embarrassment. Maybe Pell was right about cutting back on the drink. Into the small hours and the traffic dwindled to nothing, except for a couple of 'servers on routine maintenance tasks. All honest souls safely tucked away in bed, Bernice thought. All but one, anyway.

The time display showed 01.23 when Bernice suddenly said, 'Stop! Back up a minute.'

Yorland rewound and started the recording forward at normal speed.

'There!' said Bernice, pointing at the right-hand half of the screen. Yorland put the recording into slow-motion and they all peered forward intently.

Something intangible was moving across the plain lower half of the door below the glass panel. Yorland adjusted the

tone and contrast, strengthening the image. It was a multiple overlaid shadow cast by the lighting strips further down the corridor.

‘A head and shoulders?’ Ferlane wondered.

‘Could be,’ said Bernice.

The shadow was in view for almost ten seconds then slid to one side and out of shot.

Ferlane noted the time index. ‘OK, let’s see if there’s anything else.’

At 01.54, Ferlane spotted another even fainter shadow across the same door. But this was a much thinner shape that could not possibly have been a body - at least, not a human body. It appeared to rise up, oscillate slightly for almost fifteen seconds, then lower again. Its motions reminded Bernice somewhat of a tentacle.

Ten seconds later the picture on the right-hand screen blanked out.

‘What the hell?’ Yorland exclaimed.

Replaying and slowing the recording down, they saw a straight-edged sheet of blackness slide across the picture. From then on the image remained black until the recording ended.

‘Excuse me,’ said Yorland, leaving the room hurriedly. He was back in two minutes carrying a small square of general repair tape pinched between his fingertips.

‘This was stuck over the camera lens,’ he said simply.

‘So somebody didn’t want to be seen using the door,’ said Ferlane. ‘Did they go through into the next car?’

Yorland called up the recording from the camera in Car B on the other side of the coupler module and they watched it right through. The only traffic matched that which they had already seen. After the other camera was blacked out, only ‘servers on routine business used the door until the recording finished.

Bernice frowned. ‘Let’s have a look at that module.’

They made their way along the corridor to the coupler unit that linked First Class A and B cars.

‘It’s the same as all the rest,’ Yorland said.



'You're sure nobody could have opened the outer doors without you knowing it?' Bernice asked.

'Positive,' Yorland said.

'But it looks as though somebody tried,' said Ferlane.

He'd been bending down examining the cover plate beside the inner door of the right-hand external airlock. Now he pointed to a couple of small bright scratches beside two of the securing screw heads. 'These look fresh.'

Yorland frowned at them intently for a moment then drew a powerdriver from his pocket and rapidly released the whole plate. By the light of a pentorch he examined the interior wiring.

'It doesn't look as though anything else has been disturbed,' he declared at length.

'But somebody with the right tools and knowledge might have been able to bypass the systems?' Ferlane said.

'Maybe,' Yorland admitted grudgingly. 'But it would take some time. Hours maybe. These doors have too many-safeties to prevent them opening when the train's moving. And the atmosphere alarms would also have to be cut out, which would take even longer.'

'Unless our thief simply put more sticky tape over the sensors?' Bernice suggested mildly.

Yorland scowled, as though that possibility hadn't occurred to him, and checked the airlock's sensor heads. 'No sign of any tape,' he said with some relief.

'But that doesn't mean there wasn't any there earlier,' Bernice observed.

Back in the monitor room Yorland said, 'The system's got some basic enhancement functions. Let me see what I can do with the images we've go...' He bent over the console.

'Well, the shadows were there around the timeframe for the murder,' Ferlane said to Bernice as Yorland worked, 'and before we stopped at Spume Lake. We've got to find out if anybody left their rooms at all, even for an innocent reason, during that period. We have to eliminate them anyway, and they might have seen something.'

‘Maybe they only needed to open the inner airlock door,’ Bernice suggested. ‘Suppose the space between them was used as a temporary hiding place for the Imnulate until morning, after the monitors cut. Then an accomplice from another car collected it before everybody else was up.’

‘They’d still need to open the door again to retrieve it,’ Ferlane pointed out. ‘Would they have the time?’

‘I think I’ve got something,’ said Yorland. ‘This is the first image... the head and shoulders, or whatever.’ The section of door with the shadow falling across it had been expanded to fill the screen. ‘I’m getting the system to overlay and combine the multiple images... There we are.’

The shadow grew more intense and the edges sharpened. It was a head and shoulders seen almost full on. But the head itself bulged grotesquely with half a dozen large rounded protuberances around its upper curves. In turn smaller looping filaments surrounded the distorted head in a sort of halo.

‘If that’s real and not some sort of helmet,’ said Yorland slowly, ‘then it’s like nobody on this train I’ve yet seen!’

## TECHNICAL MATTERS

Nathan Costermann managed a faint smile at Bernice and Ferlane over the white sheets of his bed.

‘From what the doctor has told me, I seem to have made something of a fool of myself. That’s not a feeling I am very familiar with and I find it exceedingly unpleasant... especially considering the consequences.’

‘Don’t blame yourself,’ said Bernice.

‘I’m afraid my conscience will not be so easily satisfied. I indulged myself. I showed off my prize for the last time when I should have kept quiet about its presence. Perhaps I tempted somebody into committing murder. Well, now I shall pay the price, both emotionally and financially.’

‘But it was insured,’ Bernice said.

Costermann grimaced. ‘Ask Mr Ferlane. I’m sure he knows the value his company was willing to cover the Innulate for was only the reserve price: half of what it might have fetched at auction, if the right people had bid against each other.’

‘Actually,’ Ferlane admitted, ‘for what it’s worth, we don’t think this was an impulse crime. News of the Innulate’s transfer had already leaked out.’

Costermann started. ‘Really? Well, that at least was not down to me. I promise you I didn’t speak a word to anyone about the matter until I was on board - apart from the representatives of your firm and Tralbet, of course.’ He scowled. ‘But I believed the MaxSec case was foolproof. A representative of the insurers locked the Innulate in there himself, and only his head office in Thule has the combination.’

‘I meant to ask about that,’ Bernice said. ‘I presume there was more to it than thumblocks.’

‘Much more. Even my thumbprint wouldn’t allow the Imnulate to be removed from the inner compartment. Being able to check the condition of an item visually and tactually while in transit did not compromise the rest of the system,’ Costermann explained. ‘I’m sure Mr Ferlane will correct me if I go wrong, as the technicalities are beyond me, but I understand the case continually projects a sensor field around the inner compartment, attuned, in this instance, to the Imnulate’s surface contours down to the millimetric level. Even if the Imnulate was wrapped inside something or broken into pieces, the system would still recognize it as soon as it touched the sensor field shell. An alarm would be triggered instantly, together with a force field that would cut off a hand or anything else reaching into the inner compartment. The force field is also activated if somebody tried to break the container open, of course.’

‘Suppose the whole case was stolen?’

‘The alarm would have been triggered automatically unless either Tralbet or myself was carrying the case. If it was taken from us despite all the deterrents, there would still be the problem of finding the right combination amongst the several trillion possible. And if the correct deactivation sequence wasn’t used within a certain time, it would saturate the interior of the container with a radioactive tracer. In the last resort, if the case or field is penetrated or when its internal power starts to run low, it will self-destruct.’ He broke off and made a wry face. ‘I sound as bad as the security rep who demonstrated it. But that is essentially correct, is it not?’

‘That’s about it,’ Ferlane confirmed. ‘We’ll make some enquiries with the manufacturers and see if they can work out what happened. Meanwhile, perhaps you can tell us what you remember about last night? After the party, I mean?’

‘Nothing.’ Costermann frowned, touching his fingertips to his temple as though it still ached. ‘That is, I think I remember lying in bed and then feeling slightly dizzy. But that’s all. I’m sorry. And sorry too about Tralbet. Poor fellow. So reliable. I don’t know what I’ll do without him.’

‘Would Tralbet have still been in the lounge at this time?’

‘Possibly. He may have been about to take the MaxSec case into his room when he retired for the night. At least, that was what we agreed.’

‘Do you recall one of the passengers you showed the Immolate to last night: Colton Terbery - a slim man with close-cut sandy red hair?’

‘Ah... vaguely, I think. What of it?’

‘His real name is Jordan Tyne. Does that mean anything to you?’

‘No.’

‘Do you remember travelling on the *Solar Queen* a few years ago, and losing some money in a game to a card-sharp you subsequently had punished?’

Understanding spread across Costermann’s face. ‘Oh, so that’s who he is! Yes, he might bear me a grudge.’ Costermann’s eyes flashed. ‘You think he was responsible? Have you caught him? Is he still on the train?’

‘We’ve got him safely tucked away,’ Bernice admitted, ‘but we don’t think he did it.’

Costermann looked surprised. ‘But surely he’s the obvious suspect?’

‘Perhaps,’ said Bernice, ‘but we haven’t finished our inquiries yet. You told me you had other enemies, and that you’d been getting offers and threats concerning the Immolate. It’s not likely that Tyne would have sent those.’

Costermann lay back against his pillows for a moment, then nodded. ‘No, I suppose it isn’t. But who else could it have been?’

‘Denn Lankril, perhaps?’ Bernice suggested.

‘Now I know he’s a bit of a hothead, but I cannot believe he’d do anything like this.’

‘But he did crash your party and make threats, and he did book on to the *Express* at the last minute. What was that scene all about, by the way?’

Costermann hesitated. ‘It’s a matter of confidential personal business. Perhaps I should wait until the proper authorities arrive.’

'I know we're only investigating in an unofficial capacity,' said Ferlane, 'and we have no power to compel you to co-operate, but if we can get to the bottom of this affair now, the police may not have to dig so deeply later. Because if they suspect this case might have a personal motive, they'll be investigating anybody you know who might have been involved; friends as well as enemies. It could get messy.'

'Well, when you put it like that,' Costermann said. 'All right. The Lankril estate has had poor harvests for a couple of years, and unfortunately they had just made some considerable capital outlay on new machinery. Their bank was unwilling to restructure their loan. Now I knew Denn's father quite well some years ago before he died, and I said I might personally underwrite the loan, as long as I could check over and approve their new business plan. I didn't like some of Denn's proposals and he stubbornly refused to alter them. Therefore I said I could not give my guarantee. But the boy had already foolishly told his bank that I had made a firm promise to do so. Now he has to explain himself to his bank and find some new source of finance. Unwilling to admit his own shortcomings, he blames me for all his problems. But I still don't believe he is capable of such a crime.'

'Do you suspect anyone else?' Bernice asked.

'There's always Klemp. I wouldn't put anything past him.'

'Yes, I remember you telling me about him. But surely he wouldn't try to steal something literally from next door?'

'He might assume everybody would reason exactly that way.'

'We'll see,' said Ferlane. 'Well, I think this will do for the moment. The doctor said we shouldn't stay too long. You'll let us know if you remember anything else about last night? Anything at all - it might be important.'

'Naturally. Meanwhile, can I have some of my personal things from my room? I understand it has to remain sealed, but perhaps I could have my toilet items, a change of clothes and my business case. I don't think they can have any

relevance to what happened, but by all means examine them first if you wish.'

'I should think that can be arranged,' said Ferlane.

'I'm not pretending everything is normal,' Costermann continued, 'but I am determined not to let this sad business completely disrupt my life any further than necessary. That would mean giving into thieves and murderers. You understand?'

'I think so,' said Bernice.

They returned to Yorland's monitor room, where the engineer was still trying to improve the quality of the shadow images they had found. The second shadow now resembled a slightly crooked snake. Whatever had cast it must have been further back from the door than the 'alien' head and shoulders, but there seemed little chance of finding out more with the equipment they had available.

As they were peering at the strange forms Bassit came in.

'I thought you might be interested to know that the initial investigations at Spume Lake have found no trace of the *Imnulate* with either the freight or passengers from the *Express*. They were all local residents and well known and everybody has been accounted for.'

'That was quick work,' Bernice commented.

'It is a small community, Professor, and most unlikely to harbour major jewel thieves.'

Bernice smiled. 'Anything else?'

'I'm afraid the news services are clamouring for more details of the crime. TGR and the police have made official statements, but that has not satisfied them.'

'Well, at least we won't have many reporters dropping in on us out here,' said Bernice, 'unless we pick them up at any regular stops along the way.'

'No, but regrettably some reporters seem to have obtained the *Express's* passenger list and are checking it against the telephone directory. Several passengers have already been contacted and offered sums of money for details of the story.

I advise you to turn your personal links off when they are not in use.'

'Thanks, we'll do that.'

'Meanwhile, where do we go from here?' said Ferlane.

'Well,' said Yorland, turning aside from the monitor screen for a moment, 'I've thought about it some more and for what it's worth I don't believe anything could have been dropped off the train unnoticed. It would take too long for a start. Despite those scratches on the doorplate there are just too many systems that would have to be bypassed, and there's no sign of further tampering either physically or on the system monitor logs. They must have given up and tried something else.'

Bernice didn't question his professional judgement any further. 'All right, so what next?'

Ferlane shrugged. 'If it's not in Spume Lake, and hasn't been chucked overboard, then it must be hidden on the train somewhere, probably in Car A. Which means...'

Ferlane and Bernice exchanged understanding glances, then turned to Bassit, who suddenly looked apprehensive.

'No, Mr Ferlane, Professor: think of the inconvenience to the passengers!'

'Sorry, Mr Bassit,' Bernice said, 'but I think we're going to have to search the train - starting with the compartments in First Class A.'

The cloudtops of Tempest shone brilliantly five hundred kilometres below as the Skystation completed another orbit over its poles. Invisible in the darkness of the shadowed hemisphere was the only break in the clouds; the swirling fluctuating vortex over the pole itself, where sharp-eyed watchers occasionally caught a glimpse of the lights of Thule dome. These, however, were often eclipsed by the pulsing glows and firefly sparkles of the perpetual lightning storms that illuminated the Tempest night. Over these hung streamers of cold auroral fire, energized by solar flare outbursts and concentrated by Tempest's powerful magnetic field.



The spectacle had drawn many of the transit passengers to the great observation windows, but it did not divert Owen Rosen. He had seen it too many times before. And on this day especially he had other things on his mind.

From the slowly turning central drum of the station he took a free-fall tube up the central axis to the communications arrays. These projected from the opposite end of the station to the docking booms where starships and shuttles moored. The array held the delicate antennae that linked Tempest with the rest of the system and the distant stars. Via a ring of relay satellites they beamed signals down to the dishes of the polar ground stations and received their often faint and static distorted replies. A separate receptor ring monitored all ships passing through a ten million kilometre sphere of space about Tempest.

Rosen checked in at the array control room a few minutes before his duty period commenced. He glanced over the operating log books as he chatted with the engineer he was relieving. At the appointed time his opposite number departed and Rosen assumed control.

For an hour he gave routine orders to the team of men and maintenance robots under him. Then he handed over to his second, picked up a toolkit and started on his personal rounds. He worked his way through the service tubes, checking the main junctions and servo system links as was his habit. He exchanged a few words with a junior engineer working on a minor repair and continued on.

It was only when he reached a certain locked maintenance hatch that he broke with routine. He looked up and down the tube to be sure he was alone, drew on a pair of gloves, opened the hatch with his pass key, slipped inside and closed it behind him. He was in a narrow service shaft fitted with a ladder to aid movement in its micro-gravity interior. He checked his watch and began to haul himself along the shaft. For the first time he began to sweat.

A fifteen-metre climb brought him to a conduit junction where the feed lines from the external scanner arrays merged. He used the powerdriver from his tool kit to remove

the cover plate and expose the thick bundle of cables within. From his pocket he pulled out the device Smith had given him together with the diagram that had accompanied it. It was a slim fiat black unit about the size of his hand and featureless except for a row of contacts and adhesive pads running down one side. He checked the cables before him with the schematic layout on the diagram until he had traced the one he wanted. Carefully he tucked the device around behind the cable bundle so it was out of sight, and pressed it into place. There was a slight click as the contacts fastened on to the cable.

Breathing rapidly he replaced the cover plate, repacked his tools and pushed himself back down the shaft. He listened intently before opening the hatch into the main corridor, scrambling through it and locking it shut once more. He tore off his gloves and stuffed them away, then checked his watch. Less than five minutes. Nobody could possibly have missed him in that time. He mopped his forehead with a handkerchief and then, walking briskly, he continued on his rounds.

In due course he returned to the main control room. After a suitable interval he ran a general systems check, personally keying in one particular test sequence not in the manual. Every system responded correctly, including Smith's device. When his shift ended he would send the coded message to the number Smith had given him confirming the installation had been accomplished successfully.

For a few minutes Rosen felt only relief that the worst was over. He had fulfilled his part of the bargain. Now, if Smith wanted to keep the device secret, he'd have to return the IOUs as he'd promised. Yes, of course he would.

Wouldn't he?

The search of Car A was conducted by Bassit and two other stewards, since they represented the familiar face of the railway authority and their presence was less likely to be resented. Bernice and Ferlane waited outside in the corridor ready to assist in case anything was discovered. They

expected Monty Klemp to object to the procedure, but he apparently gave no trouble; according to Bassit he treated the whole matter as something of a joke. It was Lucas Sommers who protested most loudly, evidently deeply insulted that anybody could begin to suspect he had anything to do with such a crime. They could hear his voice out in the corridor, intercut with the fainter tones of Clarris Sommers trying to calm him down. Bernice felt sorry for the girl. Parents could be so embarrassing at times.

But eventually, with many apologies from Bassit, his stateroom was searched, and nothing was found. The team moved on to the next compartment, methodically working their way through the whole carriage, overlooking no space that could possibly contain the Imnulate.

And they found nothing.

‘If it was a smaller, less distinctive item, I might believe we could have missed it,’ said Bassit, dabbing at his head with a handkerchief. ‘But the places it can be hidden are quite limited, and it certainly cannot be concealed inconspicuously about the person. Therefore I am confident in saying it is not in this car.’

‘Then it must be somewhere else,’ said Ferlane impatiently. ‘How long would it take to search the whole train?’

‘Please, Mr Ferlane!’ Bassit protested. ‘Not until tomorrow. It is getting dark and we have other duties to attend to.’

Ferlane relented, though it was obvious he was far from happy. Bassit and his stewards returned to their regular duties.

‘They’ve done the best they can,’ Bernice pointed out. ‘Don’t be too hard on them.’

Ferlane ran his hand through his hair irritably. ‘I know, but I just find the whole business incredibly frustrating.’

‘Well, we’ll have the Proctor from Sirocco Flats tomorrow. We’ve done some useful groundwork. He can have the fun of interviewing everybody.’

Ferlane grunted dismissively. Bernice frowned at him.

‘You were hoping to solve this before the police got here, weren’t you? What you really want is the freedom to tear this

whole train apart, without bothering whose toes you tread on.'

'What do you think! Remember the Imnulate was my responsibility while it was on the train. I've got to account to my chiefs for its loss. I could lose my job if they decide I was negligent.'

'Well, they certainly can't blame you for whoever let Tyne in on the secret. That must have happened weeks ago. When were you assigned to the job?'

'Ten days ago.'

'There you are then. Whoever did this was probably preparing just as far ahead, while we've only had a few hours to try to make sense of it all.' She looked at her watch. 'Was that only this morning? It's been a very long short day.'

Ferlane was smiling at her. 'You're good at reassuring people, you know that?'

'You're welcome - just as long as you don't mistake me for some Polyannaish cock-eyed optimist. Deep down I'm cynical as hell. It's just that I know the universe is so loaded against you from the day you're born, that there's no point in adding to your woes further by indulging in pointless self-recrimination.'

Ferlane looked at her disbelievingly. 'Ms Granite Heart, eh?'

'OK,' Bernice relented. 'I don't like to see people being miserable. But that's just being selfish, understand?'

'Sure. How are you with lame kittens?'

'Don't push it!'

'How about getting ready for dinner?'

'Now that's more like it. We need to think constructively and I need brain food. Red wine and a five-centimetre synthetic steak with all the trimmings.' She suddenly gave a dry chuckle. 'Isn't the human mind a wonderful thing?'

'What do you mean?'

'That we can think of food at all - when for all we know there might be a murderer sitting at the next table.'

The passenger calling herself Lyn Masco sat in the tourist dining car picking at her food.

Zara, her acquaintance from the breakfast queue, who had apparently decided to take her under her wing for the trip, was seated beside her recounting to anybody who would listen details of gory crimes from half the sector, then assuring them they had nothing to be frightened of.

Lyn responded mechanically to the flow of talk while thinking of Tyne. It seemed as though he'd kept his mouth shut about her presence, making her feel slightly guilty that she'd ever thought otherwise. But now, if she couldn't do anything to help him, should she get off at the next stop? Her ticket was for Thule, but in the circumstances she could always claim to be frightened of continuing on the train. But would the police still question her as a matter of routine, and would her false identity stand such examination?

As she was turning over these thoughts she noticed the display panel at the end of the car showed the *Express's* average speed had fallen due to head winds. Even as she watched the estimated time of arrival at their next stop was being revised. She sagged a little more in her seat.

It was going to be a long trip.

Walking back through Car A after dinner, Bernice and Ferlane lingered in the corridor until the rest had either returned to their compartments or else gone up to the lounge. The lights had dimmed to their night settings, recreating the conditions under which the mysterious shadows had been cast. Once they were alone they walked up and down experimentally, watching how their own shadows fell across the door at the lower end of the car.

'Remember the head and shoulders moved to the right,' said Ferlane. 'Was it to use a door?'

'Maybe... or just keeping to one side of the corridor in case somebody was looking through the coupler windows from the next car. Or to keep clear of the monitor camera.'

'Well, to be as sharp as it was, whoever or whatever cast it must have been within, say, live metres of the door,' Ferlane stated. 'What does that include?'

‘The stairs, compartments 5, 7 and 8 and the ‘server’s kennel.’

The ‘kennel’, as Yorland had called it, was set between compartment 7 and the end wall of the car. There was a low narrow door, rather like a catflap, for the ‘servers, set in a flush human-sized door with an unobtrusive keyplate. Still, locks could be picked, Bernice thought. They’d have to confirm with Yorland that he’d checked it out.

A little more experimentation confirmed that whatever cast the second shadow had to be further away from the end of the car, but not more than halfway along, where the intervening lights would wash it out completely. And it had been tall, perhaps brushing the ceiling. Even Klemp’s Narg bodyguard was not quite that tall and his bulk would have cast a broader shadow.

Bernice yawned. ‘I think that’s enough for today, especially as I still need to make up for last night. Sorry we can’t get this whole thing buttoned up in one go. Don’t get too down. I don’t think you could have prevented it.’

Ferlane nodded resignedly, and gave a quirky smile that Bernice found rather appealing. Then he trudged away towards his own compartment.

### **From the diary of Professor Bernice Summerfield**

Like it or not I’ve got mixed up in this thing. Bang goes any chance of a relaxing journey and getting convivial with people in a civilized manner. It’s amazing how a murder puts a damper on things. I can sense even Ferlane is being friendly but reserved. Pity, as I suspect he’s an interesting man: intelligent, keen, dedicated... have I mentioned he’s also got a good body? Down, Bernice! After this is all over, maybe? But he’s preoccupied with the job in hand, and the problem is I’m a sucker for puzzles as well. OK, let’s try to work this out methodically.

According to the compartment allocation plan for Car AI got from Bassit, if I’m facing forward towards the engine, even numbered compartments are on the right, odd on the left,

with the numbers running down the car. Brandon and Deek, Klemp's bodyguards, are in 1, while compartment 2 opposite them is Ferlane's room. Number 3 is occupied by Glavel Merch, some sort of businessman, and 4 is/was Terbery/Tyne's. Ellyn and Warwick Verson, offworld tourists, are in 5, while 6 is mine. 7 contains the impulsive Denn Lankril and 8 belongs to the fussy and helpful Lorrix Wilver.

On the deck above are three stateroom compartments which TGR, for unspecified reasons, letters rather than numbers. The furthest forward is stateroom A, belonging to Monty Klemp. B held Costermann and the late Tralbet. C belongs to father and daughter Sommers. The individual sets of spiral stairs and 'server lifts that give access to them from the lower corridor are set between compartments 2 and 4, 3 and 5, and 6 and 8, respectively.

Likely as not, one of the people on that list committed the crime. Unless the shadows actually belong to some unknown intruder who entered Car A by means unknown, in which case I'm wasting my time because they probably left the train at Spume Lake. On the other hand, somebody in Car A may just have waited until morning when the monitors automatically cut, and then passed the Imnulate on to an accomplice in Car B before everybody else was moving about. This opens up the field. Will they have to check on everybody in Car B, or the one beyond that: Service 2? When will they start suspecting the crew as well?

According to the local late news the police are still reluctant to give more details, saying only that the murder will be fully investigated. Popular opinion, however, has already been stirred by the incident. Apparently, questions have been raised in the legislature about the affair, with several members questioning the decline in moral values that have led to such a crime. Others pointed out that it seems to have been motivated by an alien religious artefact, and that the *Express* is carrying many off-world tourists. They're wondering whether foreign imports and tourism should be restricted.

Sensationalizing nonsense which makes me uneasy.

Since it was settled. Tempest's inhabitants have lived uncrowded lives with plenty of elbow room. But now two hundred and fifty of them are sharing a train with a possible killer and a lot of fear and prejudice with nowhere to go.

How long before the cracks begin to show?

*Extract ends*



Sirocco Flats was a strange stark place, especially seen in the ruddy early morning light.

The ribbon of the monorail track ran out across a wide plain, perhaps a desiccated lake bed, patterned with a web-work of deep cracks that stretched away to the indefinite horizon. Bernice thought of it as the ultimate crazy-paving patio. Across this expanse marched swirling dust devils whipped up by the fitful wind, which also propelled 'rollers': Tempest tumbleweeds four metres across which bounced along in flat slow-motion arcs. Flitting in and out of these were silvery paper-light creatures resembling living sailboards with double sails. These 'surfers' skimmed the dead lake, twisting their sails to catch the wind and skipping high over the deepest cracks as they came to them. This caution was explained when one surfer crossed too low. And arm trailing a grey veil behind it like a shawl lashed out from the depths of the crack and enveloped the creature in its web, and in a moment was gone.

'We shall be arriving at Sirocco Flats in two minutes,' Bassit informed the passengers.

The wind dropped briefly and a shadow appeared out of the haze, straddling the monorail line. It was the town of Sirocco Flats itself, built into an isolated rocky pinnacle standing in the centre of the plain. As they sped towards it Bernice saw that the track dived into a cave at the base of the mount, presumably emerging again on the far side.

The *Express* slowed and entered the tunnel mouth smoothly. Artificial lighting strips flashed by, seeming harsh after the muted diffuseness outside, but there was no elaborate airlock system as they had in Carlsbad. They glided

into the station itself, with a curving armourglass wall dividing them and the outside air from the platform. Mounted in this were telescoping passenger tubes waiting to link with the airlocks on the *Express's* coupler modules. There were perhaps a score of people on the platform and a pile of cargo pallets. The *Express* came to a smooth stop and settled down over the rail. A single passenger tube extended, connecting to the module linking Service 1 with the engine, and three officials in TGR uniforms walked through it and stepped on board. There was a minute's pause, then another announcement:

'Will passengers intending to disembark at Sirocco Flats please stand by.'

Bernice and Ferlane made their way forward to Service 1, where they found Bassit in earnest debate with the TGR officials.

'What's going on?' Ferlane demanded. 'Where's the Proctor?'

'That is what Mr Lomis, the station master, is just explaining,' Bassit said, introducing Bernice and Ferlane.

'I'm afraid our Proctor has been delayed on an assignment up in the hills,' Lomis said. 'We were hoping he would have returned by this morning, but he managed to send a message by relay through the farm net a short while ago saying he would be at least another day.'

'Well, are we meant to wait around here for him, or are we pushing on?' Bernice asked.

'We're waiting for a decision on that from head office,' Bassit said. 'They will have to consult with the police.'

Ferlane had been looking out of the window. There was still only one passenger tube attached to the train. 'Why aren't you unloading while we wait?'

Lomis looked unhappy. 'Our orders from head office are that all passengers, baggage and goods disembarking are to be searched as soon as they set foot on the platform. You will have to make an announcement to that effect, Mr Bassit.'

Bassit nodded equally unhappily.

'Is anybody from First Class due to get off here?' Ferlane asked.

'No, Mr Ferlane.'

'Well, at least we can keep our eye on them for the time being.'

'What about new passengers?' Bernice wondered.

'There aren't any. Professor,' Lomis said bitterly. 'All those with reservations for the *Express* have cancelled. There's been nothing like it on the TGR for twenty years, even during the tornado season.'

Bernice and Ferlane watched through an observation lounge window as the single column of passengers from Tourist and Economy Class filed off the train and on to the platform, where they and their baggage were methodically searched. Some passengers were clearly protesting about this unusual procedure, which must have been almost unknown on Tempest. A few children, sensitive to the mood, were crying. Further down the station, cargo modules were being unloaded one by one and being subjected to an equally thorough examination.

'That's one thing about your planet,' Bernice said. 'It makes this sort of work easier. Nobody's going to slip the Imnulate off the train unnoticed in here.'

'True,' Ferlane agreed. 'But if it doesn't turn up soon, we're going to have to search the whole damn train. We've got to know for certain if it's still on board or not.'

Dr Pell came up to them. 'Mr Bassit has called for us all to meet him in his office. Apparently he has some more news for us.'

'Good or bad?' said Bernice. 'No, let me guess...'

\* \* \*

The four of them almost filled Bassit's tiny office in Service 1. They arranged themselves as best they could before the desk viewphone screen. On it were the head and shoulders of a business-suited middle-aged woman with an authoritative manner. Bassit introduced her to them as Anneka Neelson,

President of Trans-Global Railways. Her grave face set the tone of her communication.

‘So do we wait here for the local Proctor, or not?’ Ferlane asked.

‘No, Mr Ferlane,’ said Neelson. ‘We have consulted with the police on the matter, and it has been decided that you should continue on towards Thule without further delay. However, in view of the continuing uncertainty of your situation and the public reaction to it, we must also take other measures. I’ll hand you over to Commissioner Hynds of the police department.’

The screen split to include a stern man in a dark uniform. He looked tired and irritable.

‘This is a bad business, not being able to get a team to you promptly,’ he said. ‘Even worse that the whole matter has become the spotlight for considerable media interest. It makes Tempest’s security forces look inefficient to other worlds who don’t understand our situation. I’ve always maintained that we should have fully staffed outposts, but when our budget comes up for review they say we have too few serious crimes to justify the expense...’ He appeared to restrain himself. ‘However, that’s not your concern.’

‘Order must be maintained on *Express* for the next day at least without outside assistance. Also the investigation proper must begin without any further delay; statements taken while events are fresh in any potential witnesses’ minds, lines of inquiry followed and so forth. However, it has long been established this cannot be done satisfactorily over the phone. Now, I understand you have already been making certain private inquiries on behalf of TGR, and I have seen a summary of your conclusions so far. Your work seems competent and fairly methodical. Therefore, the circumstances being what they are, I am appointing all four of you temporary special constables in the TPD.’

Bassit continued to look grave. Pell twitched his long fingers in a gesture of mild surprise, then bowed his head in acquiescence. Ferlane grinned wryly. Bernice spoke up in dismay:

'I can see why you'd want them, but I'm not even a citizen of Tempest. I've just been... helping out.'

'We are fully aware of your status, Professor Summerfield. However, a legal precedent for an emergency appointment such as this was established in the past when Tempest was being settled. And an independent point of view might be an advantage in this case. There is a possibility this crime was committed by an off-worlder, and you have extensive multi-cultural knowledge.'

'Look, I have this problem interacting with authority -'

'We are also aware of that. Professor. We've contacted Dellah and checked your files. A Mr Irving Braxiatel, head of the... ah, Theatrology department, spoke highly of your abilities.'

'What files? What did Irving say about me?'

'That you seem to have a sense of honour and justice, and a certain academic rigour, even if it is erratic. Besides, Dr Pell assures us you could not have committed the crime. That is a strong point in your favour.'

'I won't take the job unless I get a silver star with deputy written on it,' Bernice said grumpily. 'You see: I'm frivolous and unreliable. Find somebody else.'

'It is your right to refuse. Professor. However, such a decision could be construed as failing to co-operate with the police and obstructing the course of an inquiry. There might be certain delays in processing your exit papers...'

'That's sneaky and underhand!'

'And this is murder, Professor. And I wish I was on the *Express* right now so I could take charge. But I'm not and you are and we all have our duty to do to the best of our abilities.'

Bernice sighed. 'OK - but you promise to keep my name out of the news shows. I don't want to be fighting off reporters all the way back to Dellah.'

'I promise.'

'And I still want that star when this is all over.'

Hynds smiled thinly. 'We shall see. Professor. Are there any other objections...? No? Then will you all please stand to take the oath.'

When their pledges had been given and procedure satisfied, Hynds continued:

'In your new capacity you are authorized to keep order by appropriate force if necessary, conduct interviews and searches and detain on suspicion, pending the arrival of the full investigation team, which we hope will be ready for you at Roaring Canyon. You will report progress to my office regularly, and immediately if you discover anything vital or require advice. This channel will be manned continuously. I am transmitting confirmation of your appointments, including briefing notes on the correct procedure for cautioning subjects and conducting interviews. You must follow these exactly. I expect your first report at midday. Hynds out.'

The screen darkened. Document sheets embossed with the TPD shield began to spew out of the slot in the bottom of the phone.

'OK, fellow Temporary Special Constables,' said Bernice heavily. 'What do we do next?'

'Dr Pell and I will give you whatever support you require,' Bassit said, 'but we do have other duties to attend to.'

'Yes,' agreed Pell. 'Perhaps we should concentrate on keeping the train in order. The passengers are beginning to get restless, especially after seeing the treatment of those who have just disembarked. They must realize we suspect the Immolate is still on board, therefore suspect the murderer may be as well.'

'That makes sense,' said Ferlane, scanning the police department briefing sheets. 'The Prof and I will start on the interviews. Can we use this office?' he asked Bassit.

'Of course.'

'And will you bring our interviewees in as we want them? You'll put them more at ease than we will calling on them cold.'

'As you wish, Mr Ferlane.'

‘Who first?’ asked Bernice.

‘How about the people nearest the scene of the crime: Klemp’s little party and lather and daughter Sommers.’

Montague Klemp lounged back in his chair, reading their letter of authority.

He was dressed in another expensive suit verging on the garish. Bernice noticed several rings on his thick but immaculately manicured fingers. Platinum and gold had featured heavily in their fabrication. He had a slight double chin, and there was general softness about his body where fat now overlaid what had been a powerful physique. But his pale blue eyes were deep and sharp and there was nothing at all soft about them.

Eventually he tossed the document back on the table.

‘So, the police can’t get here and they’ve appointed you as deputies. Well, that is entirely all right by me. I am always happy to co-operate with the authorities,’ he added with a broad smile and the slightest sardonic edge to his words.

‘You understand that no charge or accusation is being made against you, that this interview is for the purposes of information gathering only, but it will be recorded?’ Ferlane explained, reading from the briefing notes.

‘Sure. Go ahead.’

Bernice put a plan of First Class Car A on the table before them.

‘You are in Stateroom A, correct?’

‘That’s right: “First Class Double A”. That’s how I always travel on the *Express*. Have the compartment on a regular reserve.’

‘And your, er, travelling companions?’

‘My business associates Mr Brandon and Mr Deek have their own room on the lower deck.’ He pointed with a stubby finger to compartment 1.

‘And, uh... Ms Corzel and Ms Vale?’

‘Trinny and Debra. Nice girls... real ladies. They have the other bedroom in my compartment. I like to take good care of them,’ he added meaningfully.

'I'm sure,' said Bernice dryly. 'Now the night before last: when did you return to your compartment?'

'That would've been around zero thirty. Trinny and Brandon were with me in the observation lounge. Deek was in his room and Debra was in my compartment. We went back to my room, Brandon checked everything was OK, and then went downstairs. The girls and I must have turned in about one fifteen.'

'And did you, ah, go to sleep immediately?' Ferlane asked.

Klemp grinned. 'Not right away. But if you're wondering if I heard anything from next door, the answer's no.'

'We believe the crime was committed between one thirty and two fifteen. You're certain you heard nothing during that period?'

'I had better things to do,' said Klemp easily, 'and then I slept. I always sleep like a baby, you know that? Sign of a clear conscience.'

'Did you know Mr Costermann owned a Drell idol?'

'Sure. Everybody in Carlsbad knew that.'

'And were you one of the passengers Mr Costermann invited earlier that day to view it?'

Klemp gave a great guffaw of laughter, and had to pull out a handkerchief to wipe his eyes. 'That's a good one! Costermann invite me into his room? No way. Have you heard what he thinks about me? He'd rather invite a puff lizard.' He tucked his handkerchief away and looked at them intently for a moment. 'Cards on the table, right? People say I've done some deals which maybe crossed the line here and there - not that I'm admitting to anything, understand. But speaking - what do they call it — hypothetically: suppose I was this king of crime they say? Would I be so stupid as to lift something from next door, even if the man in question has said some not too complimentary things about me? I ask you: a null move or what?'

'The evidence suggests that somebody in the A carriage did just that,' Bernice said.

'But not me, nor any of my people. Ask them.'

'We will,' Ferlane promised.



‘Fine. Is that all?’

‘For the moment.’

Klemp stood up to leave, then paused. ‘I’ll give you this for free. Costermann is a tough operator. He takes no prisoners, you know what I mean? He’s made quite a few enemies over the years. Some of them are on this train.’

‘You mean Denn Lankril?’ Bernice said.

‘Hah. That hothead kid? Try Lucas Sommers. He and Costermann go way back. Ask him.’

Klemp departed.

‘Perhaps we should speak to Sommers right away,’ Bernice said.

‘No, let’s stick to our schedule. I’m not chasing off’ on a new tack just because Monty Klemp tosses out an inviting new lead. Let’s see what Klemp’s bodyguards have to say for themselves first.’

Brandon and Deek independently confirmed Klemp’s account almost word for word and volunteered nothing else. Whether they were involved or not, they had obviously agreed on a unified version of events and were sticking to it. However, Bernice did manage to extract one small piece of additional information from Deek.

‘Did you ever meet Mr Costermann’s bodyguard Tralbet?’ she wondered. ‘Can’t be very many Nargs on Tempest.’

Deek’s brow furrowed as he tried to work out if she was laying some sort of trap. Eventually he rumbled out: ‘Knew of him, but that was all. Don’t think our bosses would have liked us to get friendly.’

‘Did you see him on the train before he was killed?’

‘May have passed him in the corridor a couple of times. Didn’t see him after we went to our room night before last,’ he added defensively.

‘So you said. But maybe you can help me. You know how difficult it is for one species to read the expressions of another. Can you tell me how Tralbet looked to you when you did see him?’

Deek’s brow furrowed suspiciously. ‘What d’you mean?’

‘Well, did he seem happy or sad, for instance?’

Deek shrugged his massive shoulders. ‘Looked like he was thinking real hard about something. Not easy inside. Restless, yeah, that’s the word.’

After Deek had gone, Ferlane turned to Bernice. ‘What was that all about?’

‘I’d noticed Tralbet looking unhappy when I first met him. Of course it may just have been because he knew the Innulate was about to be moved. But perhaps he suspected something was going to happen.’

‘Then why didn’t he mention it to Costermann? That was his job, and Costermann could certainly have afforded more security if needed.’

‘We’d better ask him if Tralbet said anything like that.’

‘You think Tralbet was the source of the leak about the shipment? Just because he looked preoccupied? Nargs aren’t the brightest people around. It could have been anything.’

‘I know it’s a slim possibility,’ Bernice admitted.

‘Well, we can ask for any contacts Tralbet might have made in the last month or so to be checked. I can’t imagine he had a wide circle of friends. But whoever did this didn’t need Tralbet to help them break into Costermann’s rooms. And once they’d used the gas, they had Costermann’s thumb to open the outer lid of the MaxSec case.’

‘Exactly. They didn’t need anybody else.’

Ferlane frowned. ‘You mean... Tralbet might have been killed on purpose? To save a payoff?’

Bernice rubbed her eyes tiredly. ‘I’m not sure I know what I mean. It’s just a small detail that nags me. Probably worthless.’

‘Even if that was true, it still doesn’t explain where the Innulate is or how it was taken. Even if Tralbet was in on it, or was made to co-operate somehow, he couldn’t have removed it from the MaxSec case any more than Costermann could, whatever pressure was put on him or inside information he had. That’s why it had the time-lock.’

‘I know. Point taken. We’re back to our impossible crime again.’

Trinny and Debra were equally word perfect with their stories, merely confirming Klemp's account once again. They seemed excited and slightly frightened by what had happened, but without any suspicion of guilt that Bernice could detect. Both made a point of saying what a kind man Klemp was, and how people misunderstood him. Debra, apparently being the more intellectually gifted of the two, spoke in a pragmatic way; Trinny out of what seemed to be a genuine affection.

As they prattled on the fragility of their position struck Bernice. They were like spoilt pets with their expensive clothes and flashy jewels. What would they do when their more obvious charms began to fade? Did they have any deeper talents? She hoped they'd saved ahead. The warming thought suddenly came to her that though she'd never have their looks, she'd always have St Oscar's. University rectors were not fired for becoming grey and dodderly, they merely faded into the stonework and became part of the fabric. It was good to belong to something that would grow over the years and transcend a single brief human life.

Trinny and Debra departed in their turn. Then Bassit showed in Lucas Sommers.

He was stiff and correct, wearing the same severe and practical suit as before, lips set in a straight line which did not indicate pleasure or disfavour. Bernice's mind went back almost a thousand years in search of a role model. Yes, he was a modern manifestation of an old-fashioned English Puritan.

Before they could start he spoke up.

'Let me make it quite clear now. I will not permit you to interview my daughter alone. She is not yet twenty and still under my parental supervision.'

Bernice raised an eyebrow, Ferlane nodded. 'That's the law on Tempest.'

'Well, we'll come to that in a minute,' Bernice said lightly. 'Perhaps we won't have to trouble her for very long if you can

give us a full account of your movements the night before last.'

'That's very simple. Clarris and I had dinner and retired to our compartment.'

'You didn't go to the observation lounge at any time after dinner?'

'No. From previous journeys I know the company there gets unwarrantedly boisterous in the evenings.'

'So you went to your compartment when?'

'About eighteen hundred.'

'And then?'

'I attended to some business papers and then read for a while. Clarris washed her hair and then listened to some music. We went to our rooms at nineteen hours, as was our custom, and we were asleep shortly afterward.'

'You can be sure Clarris was also asleep?'

'I would have heard if she had been restless, if that's what you mean.'

'You were not disturbed in the night at all, say between one thirty and two fifteen?'

'No.'

'And what about Clarris?'

'I'm sure she wasn't. She would have mentioned it.'

Ferlane interjected, 'Mr Sommers, you weren't at any time invited into Mr Costermann's compartment to admire his Drell Innulate?'

Sommers stiffened even further. 'No.'

'Do you by any chance know Nathan Costermann personally?'

'Why do you ask? What are you implying?'

'Nothing. It's just that you're both important businessmen, you both live in Carlsbad. You might have an idea who could have learnt of his plan to travel on the *Express*. Or perhaps you know somebody who might hold a grudge against him?'

'We have no direct business dealings or any other form of contact.'

'But you do know him.'

‘Yes.’ The single word of acknowledgement seemed to be squeezed between Sommers’ clenched teeth.

‘Well then, how would you characterize your relationship with him?’

For the first time Sommers showed emotion. It was as though a deep repressed well of anger and bitter resentment had suddenly been opened. The change was so unexpected that Bernice flinched back slightly.

‘Shall I tell you what my relationship with Costermann is?’ Sommers snarled. ‘I despise him! I wish he and not his man had been killed the other night. Ten years ago Costermann took my wife away from me and almost ruined my life!’

## DETECTION BY NUMBERS

For a moment there was silence in Bassit's small office. Sommers appeared to recover himself, and when he spoke again his voice was more controlled.

'It is deeply... distressing to talk of this, but you must understand my situation. Ten years ago I had a beautiful and devoted wife... or so I thought. But then Nathan Costermann saw her and desired her, and what he desires he takes, by whatever means necessary. Under the guise of honest friendship he plied her with foolish little gifts and treats. I did not realize what was happening until the day she said she was leaving me. She said Costermann made me look... cold and uncaring, by comparison.' For a moment a look of incomprehension passed across his face, as though even after all those years he was still baffled by this explanation. Then his expression set again. 'But I would not let her take Clarris, and fortunately the courts agreed with me. And do you know what Costermann did then? After a year or so, once he had made his point and taken his pleasure, he lost interest in my former wife. He cast her off like a piece of old clothing.'

'What happened to her?' Bernice asked.

'I don't know. She was disgraced. She knew I would have nothing more to do with her. I think she left Tempest.' He looked at them bleakly. 'So you see I have every reason for wanting to hurt Costermann. But I swear I did not do so. I try to avoid even a chance meeting with him for fear I should... lose my temper and make an unseemly spectacle. I would not have come on this journey if I had known he would be on board. I have made, uh. special arrangements that allow me to check the passenger lists, because it happened once before

some years ago. But evidently this time he made his reservation under a false name. Why in heaven did he have to do that? Does he want to persecute me even further?’

‘There was a good reason,’ Ferlane said gently. ‘It wasn’t with the intention of deceiving you.’

‘If you say so. It was bad enough to discover young Lankril was on the train, but Costermann’s presence was too much. I have had to insist that Clarris stays in our compartment, even for meals.’

‘That must be hard on her,’ Bernice said automatically.

‘It is only for a few days. She understands.’

‘And what have you got against Denn Lankril?’

‘He is quite unsuitable for her. Unreliable, flighty. She formed some childish attachment to him when they were both younger... But that is beside the point. In the matter in hand, I can state that I stayed the whole night in my compartment and only learnt of the crime at breakfast. Clarris will confirm this.’

‘Then I think we’d better call her in,’ said Ferlane.

Clarris Sommers looked unhappily at them over the table, in between glancing aside at her father. Her fingers twisted nervously at the trailing ends of her auburn curls. Her dress and timid manner made her seem younger than her actual years, Bernice decided. Perhaps this was the influence of her father. He’d lost his wife, now he was clinging on to his daughter for as long as he could, keeping her as his little girl.

‘Just speak the truth, Clarris, as I’ve always taught you,’ Sommers reminded her sternly.

‘Thank you, Mr Sommers,’ Ferlane said. ‘If you could let Clarris speak for herself.’

‘Now, Clarris,’ said Bernice, ‘we want you to tell us what you did the night before last, from when you went to bed until you got up in the morning.’

‘Nothing,’ she said quickly. ‘I mean, I was in our compartment all the time. Father came back from dinner and I washed my hair while he was reading. Then I listened to some music on my headset because Father doesn’t like the

sort of music I like - and then at nineteen hours we went to our rooms, like we always do.'

'And did you go to sleep immediately?'

'Oh yes, right away.'

'Did you hear anything at all unusual in the night? Through the wall you share with stateroom B perhaps?'

'I don't think so. I mean there are always sounds on trains, aren't there? The wind shrills when we're going fast, and the couplers rattle sometimes.'

'But was there anything from next door from inside?'

She frowned. 'Well, sounds sometimes echo along the air vents, and you can often hear the water pipes gurgle when somebody uses them, but that's nothing unusual. Oh, I think I heard the train stop at Spume Lake to unload. But I didn't get up or anything. I just turned over and went back to sleep.'

'Would you have heard anybody moving about in your own compartment, for instance?' Ferlane asked casually.

'In our compartment? But nobody came into our compartment -'

'Mr Ferlane,' Sommers interjected angrily. 'I have made my statement already concerning this. I did not leave our compartment on the night in question.'

Clarris was looking at Ferlane in dismay. 'You can't believe my father had anything to do with what happened! He couldn't have... I mean, I'm sure I would have heard it if he'd left at all,' she added quickly.

'And I know my daughter did not leave our compartment either, Mr Ferlane,' Sommers said sharply, 'so that is an end to it. Now, unless you have any further questions, we shall be leaving. Come along, Clarris.'

'By the way,' Ferlane said as Sommers was ushering his daughter out, 'I forgot to ask earlier: what line of work are you in?'

'If you must know, my company designs customized computer programs,' Sommers said.



'You pushed him a little hard,' Bernice said after the two had departed.

'On his own admission he's got a very good motive,' Ferlane said. 'And that girl was keeping something back from us. Her answers were a little too fast a couple of times.'

'Yes,' Bernice agreed. 'But I don't think it's anything to do with theft and murder.' She scowled. 'Even if she is protecting her father because she thinks he might have gone out in the night, how could he have actually done it? What are the classic three requirements on which any suspicion must rest: Means, Motive and Opportunity. With Sommers we've got Motive and perhaps Opportunity, and maybe Means. He says he works with computers. Just how good is he?'

'We can ask Hynds to find out.'

'Let's. Meanwhile we go on eliminating the possibilities, as Sherlock Holmes would have it, until whatever is left must be the truth. He told me it always worked for him.'

Ferlane looked at her curiously, but merely said, 'Who shall we have next?'

'What about Denn Lankril? He seems to have links with both the Sommers and Costermann. And he's certainly got a motive.'

Denn Lankril glowered at them, arms folded across his chest. Even his Mohican haircut seemed to bristle in defiance. Bernice had to admit he was good-looking. Under his casual jacket it was evident he had a narrow waist, well-muscled arms and powerful shoulders. That he might be more than just a slab of beefcake was suggested by a high forehead and deep-set eyes. All in all she could understand a girl like Clarris falling for him. For that matter she found him quite interesting herself... She shifted suddenly in her chair and cleared her throat.

'Why did you book a passage on the *Express* at such short notice?' she asked.

Lankril looked surprised. 'That's got nothing to do with anything that's happened here.'

‘Let us be the judge of that. Now why are you on the train?’

Lankril glared at them angrily. ‘I’m going to visit the head office of our bank in Thule to negotiate a loan for our farm, if you must know.’

‘You’ve been having some money problems?’

‘Nothing we can’t sort out.’

‘But you blame some of them on Nathan Costermann. No - don’t try to deny it. You may not remember me, but I was there when you gatecrashed his party. You made quite a scene.’

Lankril ran his hand impatiently through his bristling mane. ‘I know. I... made a fool of myself. I said things I shouldn’t have done. But I’ve nothing to do with what’s happened here, I swear it!’

‘What did you do the night before last?’ Ferlane asked.

‘I left the lounge about half past midnight and came straight back to my compartment

‘Your compartment being number seven?’

‘That’s right. Anyway, I washed, changed for bed, read a little, went to sleep. I didn’t leave my room again until the morning. That’s all.’

‘Did you hear anything or anybody moving about in the corridor outside your room at any time in the night? Say between one twenty to two forty?’

‘What? No,’ said Lankril stoutly.

‘And you’re sure you didn’t step out into the corridor at all yourself, even for a few seconds?’

Lankril’s jaw set firmly. ‘No.’

Bernice cut in. ‘Do you like Clarris Sommers?’

Lankril flushed. ‘She’s got nothing to do with this!’

‘I didn’t say she had,’ Bernice replied mildly. ‘I simply asked if you liked her. Why, did you think I was suggesting she was involved?’

Lankril’s lips went white. He said nothing else of interest during the rest of the interview.

‘He’s not telling us everything he knows either,’ Ferlane said, ‘but I can’t make that shadow fit him. His silhouette’s too distinctive.’

‘In any case, this whole business suggests careful thought and planning,’ Bernice said. ‘He hadn’t got the time to prepare, and he certainly wouldn’t have made such a public scene at Costermann’s if he was planning to steal the Immolate the next day. He’s impulsive but not bloody stupid.’

Lorrix Wilver sat primly before them. He answered all their questions fully and precisely, in his slightly dated and occasionally convoluted manner of speech. He was an agent for an offworld tours company, researching Tempest to see if the industry could be further expanded to accommodate a greater number of alien visitors.

‘Tempest has been settled most industriously by humanoid oxygen breathers,’ he explained. ‘But there are races who would find the climate most pleasant without the need for artificial protection. It is those we hope to bring here if the right facilities can be provided.’

He could tell them nothing new about the night in question, having been in his compartment where he heard nothing out of the ordinary, either from the upper deck or outside in the corridor.

When they had finished, he said, ‘Can you please use all your endeavours to resolve this matter with expediency and restore the stolen item, or else I will have to contact my head office and say I will be grievously delayed. They have already asked me if this manner of incident is likely to occur frequently. How should I respond?’

‘Tell them if it does they should charge extra for the trip,’ suggested Bernice wryly. ‘How many people have a chance to take part in a real live murder hunt?’

Wilver swivelled his mobile eyes uncertainly for a moment, then brightened in understanding. ‘Ah. Humour. Levity in the face of adversity. Tum misfortune to your advantage by applying abstract values irrationally. I will suggest this.’

‘That’s the trouble with this business,’ said Ferlane after Wilver had waddled out. ‘You can’t expect people to have alibis for themselves in the middle of the night. It’s normal not to see anybody or step outside your compartment, so there are not going to be any witnesses.’

Glavel Merch handed over his business card to Bernice as soon as he sat down.

CORAMA INTERSTELLAR  
POWERED CONTOUR SENSING FURNITURE  
1427 Galen Stras, Hecten City, Mondor  
G. Merch - Sales Representative

She could have guessed Merch was a salesman from his unstylish but neat suit and well-scrubbed demeanour. He was a compact man with swarthy olive skin and thin blond hair. His eyes were very dark with large pupils. As he calmly sat contemplating them now, it seemed to her that he also did not blink quite often enough. It gave him the appearance of being intensely interested but at the same time slightly predatory.

‘Forgive me, but do furniture salesmen normally travel First Class?’ she asked.

Merch smiled easily. ‘Corama salesmen do, Professor Summerfield. Where else would we find customers for our exclusive range? Corama individually attuned furniture incorporates biosensors that adjust to your mental and physical mood from moment to moment, providing -’

‘Save it for those who can afford to listen. On a university lecturer’s pay I haven’t a hope.’

Merch smiled. ‘As you say. Professor. But please keep my card to show your friends. What do you wish to know?’

He answered their questions easily enough, but again had nothing of any significance to add to what they already knew. At the crucial time, he too had been alone in his compartment asleep.

‘Were you one of those who saw the Innulate earlier in the day?’ Ferlane asked.

‘I was,’ Merch admitted. ‘I overheard Mr Costermann talking about it to somebody else in the lounge and asked if I might also view the item. I have some slight knowledge and appreciation of gemcraft, and already knew of the Innulate by repute. Mr Costermann was most courteous and invited me along without hesitation. He even allowed me to touch it: a rare privilege to be so close to such a unique piece of craftsmanship.’ He smiled tightly. ‘And of course it also allowed me the opportunity to present my card to Mr Costermann. I had not been able to make his acquaintance while I was visiting Carlsbad. Now perhaps you see the value of travelling First Class, Professor?’

The last passengers on their list were Warwick and Ellyn Verson.

Bassit was a little late in bringing them, and Warwick Verson apologized that they hadn’t been quite ready. He was very sincere and apparently genuinely sorry to have caused any inconvenience. Bernice could see even the suspicious Ferlane warming to them. It almost seemed a shame to have to separate them for individual interviews. They were practically a perfect stereotype of an ideal devoted middle-aged couple. The sort of people you could only imagine functioning together as a single unit. Grey but still vigorous and cheerful. Bernice remembered the friendly smile Ellyn had given her as she passed their table on the first day out. When one of them finally dies, Bernice thought suddenly, the other will quickly and quietly fade away so they will be together again. She shivered. Didn’t I promise myself I was through with morbid contemplation of mortality for the trip? On the other hand it was better to be missed than not at all. Perhaps the prospect was not as sad as all that.

‘Retired now for five years,’ Warwick Verson said forthrightly. ‘We come from First Landing City on Hanson’s World. Fine place. Made myself a fair sum in the construction

business there. Now we're seeing what we can of the rest of the galaxy while we're fit enough to enjoy it.'

His story was much the same as the rest. He and his wife had accepted Costermann's open invitation to view the Immulate, and then had retired to their compartment. They stayed there for the rest of the night and saw and heard nothing untoward.

Ellyn Verson confirmed her husband's story exactly. Ferlane was on the point of finishing the interview when she added:

'The Immulate was such a... beautiful thing. It was a privilege to touch it. You will try to find it?' she asked anxiously. 'It means so much to so many people... but I know there are also those who would misuse it.'

'We'll do our best,' Bernice assured her. 'I'm sorry if all this frightens you.'

'I'm not frightened for myself, my dear. But evil should always be feared, don't you agree?'

Ferlane looked thoughtful after she had left. 'Now that was a response we haven't had before. This business has really touched her deeply.'

'But I can't see either of them raiding Costermann's room and stabbing Tralbet, can you?' Bernice said.

'No. Though I suppose if Verson was in the construction business he must have handled cutting equipment often enough.'

'You're thinking of Tyne's alternative methods for removing the Immulate? But we know nothing like that was used, and anyway I think we'd have noticed if they'd smuggled a commercial laser borer on board in their luggage. Whatever the method it was something more subtle than that.'

'Well, the Versons were the last of our prime suspects. We can't point to anybody who satisfies all your criteria fully. Only Sommers comes closest.'

'That's the problem,' Bernice said. 'We can't exclude anybody in the car on the grounds of opportunity alone. Even Brandon and Deek and the Versons could theoretically be

alibiing each other. And are Klemp's women merely what they seem or accomplished liars, brought along specially to give him an alibi? A round dozen suspects, assuming we agree neither we nor Tyne did it. Take your pick.'

'Also a dozen witnesses who neither saw nor heard anything significant. A thief and killer who came and went unseen. Unless there's some total outsider involved it has to be one of them, but who?'

'Who cast that shadow in the corridor? Maybe it was an alien with supernatural powers. Either that or they all did it,' Bernice said moodily.

Ferlane looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, then they both shook their heads.

'Fantasy aside, we've got nothing,' said Ferlane. 'Not even enough to force one of them to take a veracitor test.'

'We can ask them to volunteer when we get to Thule. That might eliminate a few.'

'But a veracitor can be beaten with the right training. And even the innocent who have nothing to lose sometimes refuse to take the test voluntarily on principle.'

Bernice rubbed her eyes and then glanced at her watch. 'We've got time enough before lunch. Let's talk to Costermann again. He may remember something new.'

Costermann was up and dressed and just gathering his possessions together when they entered the sickbay. Bassit was also in attendance.

'I've given Mr Costermann Terbery's... I mean Tyne's compartment,' he explained, 'as his own rooms are sealed. I have checked over Tyne's possessions and they are all securely locked away. But I can bring them out again if you wish.'

'Thanks, but I think we're done with Tyne for the moment,'

Ferlane said. He looked at Costermann. 'How are you feeling?'

'Quite recovered, thank you. The doctor said I should take things easy for a day or two, but otherwise there should be no lasting effects.'

‘We were wondering if you’d remembered anything else about the other night.’

Costermann shrugged. ‘Nothing at all. Sorry. Haven’t you made any progress?’

Bernice said carefully, ‘We’ve been questioning all the other passengers in A car, and one man certainly seemed to bear you a grudge. Lucas Sommers?’

Costermann nodded sadly. ‘Yes, I might have guessed it would be him. He was one reason why I was keeping to my compartment rather more than usual. I try to avoid him if possible.’

‘Apparently he does the same,’ said Ferlane.

‘And well he might. Remember when I met you in the lounge the first afternoon out from Carlsbad, Professor? Well, that was the first time I’d ventured out of my compartment since I boarded, and only when I knew he’d gone back to his own room. Of course, that evening I was sure he wouldn’t be in the lounge because there were too many people having fun for his liking. In any case by that time I was getting tired of skulking about.’ He looked at them intently, i don’t know what he told you, but I can guess he cast me as some kind of monster for breaking up his marriage. Well, for the record, Jyneen, his wife, was bored sick of him and his computer programs. Remorseless unimaginative routine dullness should be classed as mental cruelty. I wouldn’t be surprised if Clarris doesn’t leave him as well as soon as she has the chance.’

‘And Jyneen Sommers ran to you?’

‘I happened to be available, but it could have been anybody. Naturally I took her in. I don’t pretend it was purely out of altruism. She was a very beautiful woman and wanted a proper rewarding relationship. But she’d been ruined by her years with Sommers. She soon changed from being a timid grey creature, almost frightened to enjoy herself, to a sort of sensual glutton wanting to experience every pleasure that she could. Trying to make up for lost time I suppose. Anyway she began to make a spectacle of herself and I found I couldn’t reason with her any more. Finally, I had to tell her



we couldn't continue together. She had a minor mental breakdown and soon after left Carlsbad. I don't know where she is now.'

'And Denn Lankril also bears you no good will. He seems to think you went back on a promise to guarantee a loan.'

Costermann snorted. 'I didn't give any firm promise. The boy took my provisional agreement as a definite commitment. Well, for his father's sake, maybe I'll speak to him again once this is all over. But he must try to be more reasonable. Now, if you'll excuse me, I want to get settled in my new room. Rather ironic that it belongs to a thief, isn't it?'

'Only a potential thief,' Bernice pointed out.

'Once a thief, always a thief, Professor.'

They watched as Bassit and a 'server carrying the bags escorted Costermann through to Car A. Wilver and the Versons passed him in the corridor and complimented him on his recovery.

'Well, we'd better report back what we have to Hynds,' Bernice said.

'Then what? Interview everybody on the train?'

'No. But we might have to search it. I don't see what else is left.'

Ferlane sighed. 'I agree. But Bassit's not going to like it.'

Ferlane had judged Bassit's response accurately. But Hynds agreed that a complete search was the obvious next step to take, and so he reluctantly acquiesced.

Before lunch they made a brief stop at the small settlement of Mist Mire. Once again nobody boarded the train, and, fortunately, only inanimate cargo was due to be unloaded. They saw TGR workers start to open the containers for examination even before they left the station.

Early that afternoon Bassit made a public announcement.

'I regret to inform passengers that it is necessary to carry out a complete search of the entire train to confirm whether the Drell idol, stolen two days ago, is still on board. The search will be conducted by the staff and specially appointed police officers. All passengers must remain in their own

compartments while their car is being checked. You will also be asked to identify and open any personal baggage on request. Any persons with items in the freight cars will also be asked to open them, and may be present while they are examined.

‘Trans-Global Railways apologize for any inconvenience this may cause, but request your co-operation and understanding during this difficult time. Thank you.’

Bernice, Ferlane, Pell, Bassit and a team of stewards, together with Yorland’s engineering assistants, searched the train. Every locker, maintenance panel and duct cover that could possibly conceal an object the size and shape of the Immolate was opened, checked, then sealed.

‘What about those?’ Bernice asked Yorland, pointing to a small cover plate in a main corridor ceiling.

‘Opens on to a cable duct. Power, telephone and intercom. Same in every car. But they’re only twelve centimetres deep, so your idol couldn’t fit inside.’

‘Unless somebody smashed it to fragments,’ Ferlane said darkly.

Bernice hesitated. ‘Perhaps we should consider that possibility.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Yorland. ‘I know something about materials and what it takes to break them. Smashing a crystal of that size thoroughly would take time and make plenty of noise, apart from cutting up whatever surface it was resting on pretty badly. You couldn’t do that on this train without being noticed.’

Crew and passenger rooms were examined alike. The dining cars and lounges were checked, and even the big club chairs were overturned and their underlining’s pulled open to check nothing had been concealed inside them.

The searchers received a stream of heavily accented abuse for disturbing the order of his kitchens from Jean-Louis, the *Express*’s chef. He was seated before the keyboard of his food synthesizer beginning preparations for the evening’s dinner; a maestro about to perform a culinary symphony. Bernice

thought having a temperamental chef from New France on board was too good to be true, but Bassit assured her Jean-Louis was the real thing. He'd been with the company for eight years and genuinely cared for nothing outside his own craft.

When they reached Tyne's former compartment, Costermann welcomed them in with a wry grin. 'Of course, you'd better check in here just in case.'

He sounded hearty, but Bernice thought he looked slightly grey and drawn, as though a reaction was setting in.

'I'll be all right,' he assured her. 'Sat up in the lounge for a while. Everybody was very kind. But I do feel a little tired. Apparently it takes time to get that gas out of the system.'

'Do you want the doctor?'

'No, thank you. I'll call him if necessary, but simple rest is the answer.'

They left him and continued on down the train, searching both crew and passengers' quarters, baggage cars and service units. When they finished in a car, a steward was placed on guard at its communicating door with orders to check any passenger or crewperson carrying any piece of luggage that could possibly contain the Imnulate. During six hours they worked methodically from the driver's cab to the last compartment of the tail service car, finishing only after darkness had once again enshrouded the train.

And they found nothing.

'If we were looking for anything smaller I'd agree that we might have overlooked it,' Bernice told Hynds over the viewphone, when they reported back exhausted and slightly disconsolate that evening. 'But there's no way we could have missed a substantial object the size of the Imnulate. It's simply not on the train.'

'Well, that may be good news for you,' Hynds said. 'Perhaps it will reassure your passengers. We'll have to check Spume Lake again. It seems to be the only place it could have been taken off.'

Bassit made another public announcement to confirm their results, adding encouragingly that this suggested whoever

was responsible must have been an outsider who had slipped aboard unseen, and who almost certainly left the train within an hour of committing the crime.

The mood on the *Express* lightened perceptibly, but Bernice could not share it. The search party was dismissed. Bernice heard Yorland depart muttering half to himself: 'But how could they have got it off the train?'

### **From the diary of Professor Bernice Summerfield**

We're all tired and pretty dispirited: Ferlane especially who's really taking it personally. That much effort deserves to have been rewarded, but instead we've got another mystery. Not only how the *Imnulate* was stolen, but where it's been hidden. It's obvious Yorland doesn't really believe it could have been taken off the train, but what other possibility is there? Could somebody else have used Tyne's method? But the trail seems to go dead at the coupler module between cars A and B. Somebody else might have picked up the *Imnulate* from there, but they'd have to have worked quickly to jettison it before the panic started. And surely they'd have been seen carrying a suspicious bundle or trying to open any of the outer doors. And even if you can fool the alarms, opening a hatch is going to let in outside air. And that smell is very persistent so you'd soon notice... except the suit lockers!

Did Yorland check them?

Later. I've just talked to Yorland over the intercom. Yes, he did check them, and every suit in them. And he reminded me there was no way the big service hatch could have been opened at speed without tearing it off. Maybe I'll give up the amateur detective business.

Will the professionals do better when they come on board tomorrow?

*Extract ends*

A steady knocking at her door jerked Bernice awake. Ochre light was filtering in between the blinds. The clock said seven

ten local time. She hadn't set the alarm. She was going to miss breakfast. The knocking became more urgent.

'Coming... coming.'

She dragged herself into her dressing gown and opened the door. Bassit was standing there, and the expression on his face revived her like a douche of ice water.

'It's Mr Merch,' he said simply. 'He's been murdered.'

## UNDER PRESSURE

This time there was a white-faced steward guarding Merch's door, Bassit evidently having learnt his lesson about restricting access to the scene of the crime. But otherwise it was like a macabre re-enactment of the morning two days before: Bernice still in her night clothes, watching Pell bending over a still form lying face down on the floor. Ferlane pushing his way into the room after her, cursing under his breath. From the corridor came the babble of passengers' voices.

'I found him myself,' Bassit explained woodenly. 'I had noticed Mr Merch was an early riser and one of the first to come through for breakfast. I was just passing his door... and it seemed too quiet. When I knocked and got no response, I used my pass key... and found him like this.'

Merch appeared to have died from a blow to the back of his head which had cracked his skull. His solid metal-banded business case lay open on the floor beside him. Bernice could see blood and hair on one corner. Again the killer had to use a makeshift weapon. Was that significant?

However, Merch's room was far less tidy than Costermann's had been. Somebody had systematically ransacked it. Drawers were pulled out and clothes strewn across the floor. Even the bedding had been turned over. A snow of documents were littered about. Bernice could see several copies of brochures extolling the virtues of Corama-powered furniture.

Who was going to tell them Merch had made his last sale? Fragments of plastic crunched underfoot. Merch's phone had been shattered and silvery slivers of circuitry joined the other detritus.

Ferlane knelt down beside the remains for a moment, then examined the open business case, taking care not to touch it. Bernice realized a cover panel on the standard integral computer was loose. Ferlane found a pen amid the litter and carefully lifted the panel aside. There was a void within where the memory core should have been.

‘Somebody was looking for something Merch knew,’ he speculated. ‘Maybe that’s why he was killed. But it was something that he might also have hidden among his printouts or in his phone or office case memory. So they were torn out.’

Pell stood up and looked at them. ‘Killed by a single blow to the head. No other signs of injury, though I’ll have to make a more detailed examination to confirm that. The case is the obvious weapon. The corner matches the shape of the wound and I would say it was heavy enough if swung vigorously.’

‘Time of death?’ Bernice asked automatically, realizing they were inexorably heading down the same dismal path once more.

‘Between midnight and two, I’d estimate.’ He paused, evidently mirroring her own thoughts, then added, ‘Shall I find some more tape and a camera?’

Bernice recognized the strained tone in his voice, and reminded herself again how hard it was to read alien expressions. She’d been taking him for granted, but Pell was no hardbitten forensic surgeon, and he must have been just as badly affected by this second violent death as they were. Especially as he would shortly be performing another unscheduled autopsy.

‘If you would. Doc,’ said Ferlane. He looked at Bassit who was standing like an effigy with a look of blank dismay on his face. ‘And you’d better call Hynds. Tell him to stop wasting his time with Spume Lake. Unless this is an incredible coincidence, it looks like whoever killed Tralbet is still on board.’

They stepped outside Merch’s room. In the corridor were the rest of the occupants of Car A, being held back by stewards. As Bernice scanned their anxious, incredulous

faces, she wondered if she was looking into the eyes of a murderer.

Half an hour later, after having dressed and snatched a sandwich, Bernice and Ferlane were examining Merch's cabin. His body had been removed, leaving behind only a tape outline and a dark stain of blood.

'This cabin's a mess, forensically,' Ferlane said. 'Worse than Costermann's. We were both in here yesterday after tramping through several other compartments, Merch himself was in and out and the public corridor is only the other side of the door, so almost any bio traces might have been carried in here quite innocently.'

Apart from Merch's phone and business case, nothing else appeared to be damaged or missing. There was no unnecessary destruction. Evidently the perpetrator had been careful not to make any noise. Some of Merch's brochures were crumpled and indented with shards of plastic where they had been wrapped around the phone to muffle the sounds of its case being broken.

'Too smart to use a heel and simply stamp on it,' Ferlane observed. 'So no tell-tale fragments embedded in anybody's soles for us to find.'

They examined the cabin lock carefully, but could see no sign of it having been forced.

'Did he let his murderer in voluntarily,' Bernice wondered, 'or was he forced to open up at the point of a gun?'

'Nobody would have dared risk trying to force their way in or shoot out the lock. The whole car would have heard them.'

'But who would he open a door to in the middle of the night on this train after what's happened?'

'Somebody he knew and trusted... or else somebody he didn't view as a threat.'

'Or somebody he was expecting?' suggested Bernice.

Ferlane scowled. 'It's possible. But who and why?'

'I don't know, but I'll bet he wasn't selling a powered chair at two in the morning.'



‘And I bet the door monitors will show nobody entered or left the car during the crucial period.’ He shook his head wearily. ‘We’re going to have to interview all the usual suspects all over again.’

‘Except now there are only eleven of them,’ Bernice pointed out.

There was a knock at the door. It was Bassit bearing several sheets of printouts. ‘I have some information that has just come through which may be of interest.’

‘This one’s about Tralbet,’ said Ferlane, scanning the first set of documents rapidly. ‘The police followed up our hunch that he might be involved in the theft. They found several round-figure lump-sum deposits paid into his account in Carlsbad during the last six months using open credit transfer cards. Pretty well untraceable and nothing to do with his legitimate salary. Very suspicious.’

Bernice looked at the tape outline on the floor. ‘Perhaps they’d better make the same sort of checks on Merch.’

‘That won’t be so easy with him being an off-worlder, but we can ask. Will you do that, Bassit?’

‘Certainly, Mr Ferlane. There is also this.’ He handed over a second printout.

‘Interesting,’ said Ferlane. ‘Apparently Lucas Sommers was quite a hi-powered computer program designer and systems analyst before he took over an executive position in his company.’

‘As you say: interesting,’ Bernice agreed. ‘What do you think of Lucas Sommers as a possible suspect, Bassit? He’s travelled with you before, so you know him better than we do.’

‘I hardly like to think of any of our passengers as potential murderers. Professor. I do not see Mr Sommers planning such a cold-blooded crime, even though he might be intellectually capable of it. I think he would feel it... undignified. I can believe he might momentarily lose his self-control and do something rash... but that does not seem to fit the circumstances of the original crime, does it?’

‘No,’ Bernice agreed.

‘And besides, what motive would he have for doing this to poor Mr Merch? Which reminds me: Dr Pell asks if you would go along to his room. Apparently he has discovered something unusual about Mr Merch.’

‘That was quick,’ said Bernice.

‘I think he feels speed is of the essence. Professor.’

Merch’s body was decently covered by anonymous white sheets when they entered the surgery. All but his dark eyes, now staring sightlessly up at the ceiling. Pell tapped one of them with a medical probe. There was a tiny hard chink.

‘Polarized and filtered lens inserts,’ he explained. ‘They may possibly be there to correct some optical problem, but more likely they were to allow him to function under unusual lighting conditions. These sort of prostheses are sometimes used by people working for long periods on worlds where their eyes would find the natural light too bright or too dim.’

‘But they could also allow him to make use of infrared or ultraviolet light sources, so he could see in the dark,’ Ferlane suggested.

‘Perhaps. I do not have the facilities to test their precise properties here, but it is a possibility.’

‘Just the useful sort of trick no good thief would be without?’ Bernice said.

‘Could be,’ agreed Ferlane.

‘You realize this lets Tyne out of the picture,’ Bernice said. ‘Unless we accept there was a whole gang of them: Tyne and Merch and Tralbet and “X”, who have now fallen out with each other and are in the process of bumping each other off.’

‘We don’t know Merch is part of any gang. There was nothing incriminating in his room. The only things we know were taken were those memory cores.’

‘But who knows what else was there before X paid him a visit? Something small enough to have been overlooked in yesterday’s search?’ Bernice wondered.

‘Maybe. What next? Checking if the other passengers saw or heard anything - again?’

‘Suppose we check the door monitor recordings for last night with Yorland, just to make sure there was no intruder from another car. Though I doubt we’ll even get shadows this time.’

The news of Merch’s death spread along the train, with rumour and speculation filling in and then overflowing the gaps between the facts. Lyn Masco listened to her travelling companions’ reactions with mounting despair. Her living depended on the fact that a large proportion of the population was unaware of just how stupid and gullible it was, but for once she wished that was not true.

‘We should all get off at the next station,’ said a man in a flower-patterned shirt, with an expensive camera hanging on its strap across his chest, bobbing every time he waved his hands in emphasis. ‘The railway company should find us a hotel until all this is over.’

‘Where are the police when you need them?’ shrilled a woman in a large and unnecessary hat.

‘I heard about the police on Sestor Three when they found this headless -’ Zara began.

‘They’ve appointed those special constables,’ Lyn cut in quickly, aware of the irony of her defending the law. ‘I’m sure they’re doing everything they can.’

There was a rising babble of voices and a group of half a dozen determined-looking men came striding through the carriage from the Economy Class cars. The style of their clothes suggested they were locals. A steward was trailing after them, bleating futilely, ‘Will you please return to your compartments, gentlemen. Your tickets don’t allow you to -’

One of the larger of the party turned and pushed him so hard that he staggered against the wall. Lyn was alarmed to see that a couple of them were carrying holstered guns. They glared belligerently at the startled Tourist Class passengers.

‘What are they doing up in the front there?’ one of them demanded.

‘We don’t know,’ said the flower-shirted man. ‘Our steward just says we should keep calm.’

‘It shouldn’t be allowed!’ said the unnecessary hat in general condemnation.

‘But they’ve still got a man locked up, haven’t they?’ growled one of the newcomers. ‘How many more is he going to kill?’

‘If he’s been locked up, he can’t be responsible for this second death, can he?’ Lyn said, trying to inject a note of sanity into the argument.

‘How do we know? They aren’t telling us anything.’

‘Perhaps there’s nothing to tell yet,’ Lyn said.

‘He’s First Class, isn’t he,’ said the belligerent man. ‘They go carefully with them because they know the right people. Money talks. They’ll pussyfoot while people die.’

‘Yeah, how long before it’s one of us? We’ve got families back there.’

‘We don’t like this any more than you do,’ said Flower Shirt forthrightly, gathering a murmur of agreement from several other tourists and locals.

‘Well then, prove it. Everybody who wants answers come with us. We’ll talk to whoever’s in charge face to face!’

‘I suppose it’s not an unreasonable demand,’ said Flower Shirt.

‘After all, we’re paying!’ said the unnecessary hat.

‘And if we don’t get some answers we’ll block the doors!’

‘Right. Come on!’

The angry party marched away along the corridor up the train, gathering new recruits along the way. Zara stared after them, open-mouthed. ‘Well really...!’

Lyn grabbed the dazed steward. ‘Call through,’ she shouted at him. ‘Warn them they might try to get to the prisoner.’

Visions of ancient lynch mobs burnt in her mind.

Bernice was right. The recordings revealed that during the crucial period only ‘servers going about their regular duties passed through the A Car doors.

‘Any more luck with enhancing our shadows?’ Ferlane asked Yorland.

‘No. Sorry. The second one still looks like a crooked snake bobbing up and down. I can’t even tell how far along the corridor it is without knowing its actual size. If it’s got a rough irregular surface, like fur or hair, then it’ll look more blurred and distant. When we get to Thule the experts can work on the original recording and set up proper calibration tests in the corridor itself.’

The latest set of recordings ended and Yorland switched off the screen. Bernice and Ferlane had risen to leave when Yorland said, ‘By the way. It may be nothing, but Merch called in one of my men yesterday evening.’

‘Oh, why?’

‘Said his phone was giving him trouble and he couldn’t get an outside line. He wondered if we’d interfered with any of the room comm panels when we made the search. My man checked the lines, but they were all clear. Could have been an unusually high burst of storm static I suppose, but our internal systems are pretty well insulated and nothing else was affected that I know of.’

‘Odd,’ agreed Bernice. ‘Probably not important, but I’d like to -’

The intercom beeped urgently. Yorland switched it on and Bassit’s anxious voice poured out, for once stripped of its normal calm. ‘Please come to Service 2 immediately... I’m afraid there’s going to be a riot!’

The corridor of Service 2 outside the sickbay was a confused throng of people. Bernice and Ferlane pushed their way through the A and B car occupants and found Bassit, Pell and a couple of frightened stewards standing in a shrinking space between them and a larger number of Economy and Tourist Class passengers. Most were waving their fists and shouting angrily, ‘Keep them out!’, and ‘Where’s the killer?’ More ominously a few were holding handguns.

The idiots, Bernice thought, taking a deep breath and dashing forward.

‘Well done, well done!’ she shouted loudly and clearly, clapping her hands in a mockery of vigorous applause.

The cries of the opposing packs of passengers faded into a puzzled murmur.

‘That’s right,’ she continued, waving her arms around in sweeping expansive gestures to hold their attention on her. ‘The solution to all our problems. Why didn’t we think of it before? There’s a killer on board, so let’s shoot each other to make his job easier! Better yet, blow a few holes in the walls and contaminate the whole carriage!’

One of the gun-toters retorted angrily: ‘This is only a mark two - it won’t hole a pressure hull.’

‘But can you be a hundred per cent certain of that? What if you hit a window? You might be happy to chance it, but do your friends feel the same? They might have better things to do than throw their lives away along with a bunch of hotheaded fools.’ She shrugged expressively, as though washing her hands of the whole business. ‘Still, that’s up to you. Give me two minutes to get along to the suit lockers and you can please yourselves. Any last messages you want me to take to your families?’

There were still angry mutterings, but the dangerous single-minded mob unity that had ruled them moments before was now blunted and divided. Ferlane stepped forward to take advantage of the confusion Bernice had sown.

‘We are officially appointed police officers. Anybody not holstering their guns after a count of five will be arrested for threatening behaviour and disturbing the peace. Do you understand me? One...two... three...’ There was a flurry of movement and the weapons vanished. ‘That’s better. Now Chief Steward Bassit will explain what is going on here, and you will be quiet while he is speaking.’

Bassit cleared his throat, recovering a measure of his normal composure. ‘I’m afraid these passengers have heard of Mr Merch’s death, and want to know what steps are being taken to catch his killer. Some of them also want cars A and B sealed off from the rest of the train, which we cannot permit for safety reasons.’

‘That’s right!’ one of the Economy Class protesters shouted. ‘Lock them all up until we get to Thule!’

‘But everything’s happened in the A car!’ a B car passenger replied desperately. ‘We don’t want to be shut up with them.’

‘Too bad!’ came the callous reply. ‘We don’t want to be murdered in our beds.’

Almost a class war, Bernice thought in despair. The stresses were showing in Tempest’s supposedly homogeneous society as she had feared. Aloud she said, ‘We are taking measures to ensure your safety for the rest of the trip.’

‘Like what?’

‘A curfew and guards patrolling the corridors all night,’ said Ferlane quickly. ‘Will you volunteer?’ The angry speaker seemed to shrink back into the crowd.

‘Look, we don’t know who the killer is yet,’ Bernice said reasonably, ‘but we’re doing everything we can to find him... or her. All this is just wasting our time. Go back to your compartments and let us get on with our job.’

‘What about the man you’ve got shut away?’ somebody else shouted, stepping forward angrily. Wilver, who had been standing behind Bernice, promptly thrust out his furred umbrella point first, making the man skip inelegantly backwards again.

‘He was a suspect at first,’ Bernice admitted, ‘but we now believe he is innocent. He certainly didn’t kill Glavel Merch.’

‘If he’s innocent, why haven’t you let him go?’ the protester demanded, eyeing Wilver’s umbrella warily.

‘Because he may still be charged with some minor offences. Besides, we haven’t any spare rooms in First Class,’ Bernice rapped back smartly. ‘Are you volunteering to find him a space in Economy? No? Then be quiet and go back to your own cars.’

Just then Yorland and a couple of engineers pushed their way through the crowd from up the corridor carrying long-handled wrenches. Out of the corner of her eye Bernice saw Klemp, Brandon and Deek appear at the back of the crowd, the massive figures of the bodyguards adding weight to her words.

Gradually, accompanied by resigned murmurs, the crowd began to disperse and file away along the corridors.

Wilver paused to tip his hat to Bernice. 'You acted with great promptitude,' he said. 'Such disorder cannot be tolerated. Please do not hesitate to call on me if you require any further assistance.'

'Thanks.'

One woman pushed her way between those heading back to the tourist cars and came up to Bernice. Her full figure was half hidden by primly cut clothes, and a slightly naked look around her eyes suggested she normally wore more make-up. She looked tired, though her dark eyes were still keen and sharp.

'The man you're holding... is he all right?' she asked hesitantly.

'He's fine,' Bernice said. 'Why do you want to know?'

'I was just... worried. Please find out who really did this as soon as you can.' And she walked quickly away.

In a minute there were only the train staff and Klemp's men left. Bernice let out her breath with relief and grinned at them. 'Nice looming,' she complimented Brandon and Deek. 'Very stylish. I bet you practise for ages to get just the right air of quiet menace.'

Klemp gave a rasping chuckle. 'You are an original. Professor. Your talents are wasted on the dead past.'

'It suits me. And sometimes the past can get pretty lively.'

'Have it your way. Just ask if you want the boys' help again.'

'That's very public-spirited of you,' said Ferlane.

'I want this mess cleared up soonest,' Klemp said flatly. 'I don't care to be on the suspect list for theft and murder. It's bad for business.'

Klemp and his men strode away. Ferlane smiled after them for a moment, but turned a grimmer face to Bernice. 'I'm going to wear my gun until this is over. I should think we've got the right in the circumstances. Can you shoot?'

'I get by,' Bernice admitted, 'but as I don't usually need to go armed to lecture on archaeology, I didn't bring a gun with me.'



'Then ask Bassit to open up the locker and give you a company issue pistol.' He glanced speculatively at Bassit and Pell. 'What about you?'

The two shook their heads.

'I don't think it would be appropriate to our positions,' said Bassit. 'We still want to try to calm the passengers. But in the circumstances I can certainly provide the Professor with a weapon.'

'And then I suppose we start questioning everybody in Car A - again!' said Bernice wearily.

It was a virtual repetition of their previous series of interviews, with one small difference. Costermann, now in Tyne's old compartment opposite Merch's, did remember being disturbed by something in the night.

'I'm sorry, I don't know what the sound was,' he said, as they sat around Bassit's desk. 'Maybe it was from outside my door. I'd taken some pills Pell had given me and I was really still half asleep. I didn't even note the time.' He blinked tiredly at Bernice. 'You're next door, did it wake you?'

'No, I didn't hear anything. Go on.'

'Well, I just got up, opened my door and looked out into the corridor. Probably not a sensible thing to do in the circumstances, but as I said, I wasn't thinking clearly.'

'What about Merch's door?'

'Oh, it was closed, I'm sure of that. Anyway, after a minute, seeing and hearing nothing alarming, I went back to bed. If I'd been more alert I might have thought of calling the steward, but as it was...' He shrugged.

'Did you remember anything unusual about Merch?' Ferlane asked. 'Did he show special interest in the Imnulate or the MaxSec case when he first saw it, for instance?'

'Not the case that I recall. He did show more than a passing interest in the Imnulate,' Costermann admitted. 'But I think that was just to ingratiate himself. He came up to me in the lounge yesterday and at first was very sympathetic, asking how I was feeling like everybody else had done. But I gradually realized he was trying to sell me one of his chairs to

help me “relax”. I was annoyed at the time, thinking he was being rather insensitive under the circumstances... but it would be churlish to make an issue of it now. He was just trying to do his job, I suppose. Sorry I can’t tell you more.’

Bernice could see he still looked tired and grey-faced. He must have read her glance, for he half smiled.

‘It’s hard to admit one is becoming old, isn’t it? Five years ago I would have shaken this sort of thing off without a second thought.’

Yawning, he left them.

Nobody else they questioned had left their rooms, or seen or heard anything of significance during the night. All of them had met Merch, or, rather, he had made a point of meeting them, but they had tended to avoid him once they realized he was trying to sell them powered chairs. Had any of them noticed him displaying unusual interest in the Imnulate? Warwick Verson thought he had looked at it intently. Had he asked about the MaxSec case? Not that he could recall.

They finished the interviews and Bassit came back in. He enquired politely if they had made any progress.

‘Not so that you’d notice,’ Bernice admitted. ‘Any of them strike you as likely suspects?’

‘I try not to have opinions about passengers, Professor. Except that I prefer those with good manners. Like the Versons, for instance. Such a nice couple. They even warn me in advance when they will be missing a meal. And they apologized so nicely for being late for your first interview. Such consideration is rare.’

‘Oh. How many meals have they missed?’ Bernice asked.

‘Four, I believe.’

‘Have they been sick?’

‘I don’t think so. They have not been to the doctor. Perhaps it’s their way of adjusting to local time.’

The phone beeped. It was Commissioner Hynds’ office, confirming there would be an investigation team waiting for them at Roaring Canyon.

‘When will we get there?’ Bernice asked Bassit after the call.

‘We’re running late due to the headwind... about lunchtime.’

‘Anybody getting off?’ wondered Ferlane.

‘Several from Economy and Tourist Class and two from Car B.’

‘Well, they’re not our prime suspects. I suppose they’ll be taken care of properly,’ said Ferlane.

‘Same treatment as before I should think,’ said Bernice. ‘Person and baggage searches, then interviews.’

Ferlane grimaced. ‘They won’t like that.’

‘But they’ll be off the train,’ Bernice pointed out, ‘and they might think that’s worth almost any inconvenience.’

They finished their round of interviews by paying Tyne a visit.

‘How long do I have to stay cooped up in here?’ he complained as soon as they unlocked his door.

‘Until we reach Thule, where you may still be charged with planning a robbery and travelling under a false identity,’ Ferlane said.

‘Don’t knock it,’ Bernice advised him. ‘Remember there’s a killer on board. You’re probably safer in here.’

Tyne appeared to see the logic of this for he brightened slightly. ‘All right, what do you want to know?’

He answered their questions promptly, and, as far as Bernice could judge, honestly.

No, he had never heard of Merch before the first day on the train, and as far as he knew he’d never met him under any other alias or disguise. Yes, he thought he remembered seeing Merch in the lounge after the latter had seen the Immulate, and perhaps Merch was slightly quieter and less outgoing than he had been earlier. Thoughtful or preoccupied, perhaps? Maybe, but who could say what that meant. Besides, Tyne had too much on his own mind at the time to pay close attention. Bernice showed Tyne still pictures taken from the door monitor record showing the mysterious shadows. Did he recognize either of them? No.

Did they resemble any alien race he'd ever come across? No, he was certain he'd never seen anything like them before.

'I think that'll be all for now,' Bernice said at length.

'You'll be sure to tell the police how I co-operated when we get to Thule?' Tyne said slightly anxiously.

'We'll tell them you're a model citizen,' Ferlane promised.

They were entering Tempest's temperate zone now, and passing through country even more mountainous than that around Carlsbad. The monorail line arched across dark chasms and plunged through laser-cut tunnels. Where external contours had to be followed the line was supported by pylons projecting horizontally from the rock faces. Sheer peaks contrasted starkly with valleys of smoothly contoured arches and undercut walls, shaped by thousands of years of gentler but still remorseless sandblasting and water erosion. In some of these more sheltered hollows trees grew almost fifteen metres tall: giants by Tempest standards.

'Ten minutes to Roaring Canyon,' came the announcement.

Bernice and Ferlane watched the departing passengers in the Economy cars eagerly gathering their handbaggage and commiserating with their less fortunate fellows. Both Bernice and Ferlane were conspicuously armed now, but there was no trouble.

The city of Roaring Canyon was excavated out of an isolated rock butte in the middle of a sheer-sided canyon five or six kilometres wide which faded away into the haze beyond it. On the summit of the butte Bernice could see a cluster of domes. The silver thread of the monorail line seemed to stride across the jungle-clad canyon floor, carried clear of the wind-tossed tree-tops by double-strutted pylons twenty metres tall. The butte grew more distinct as they raced towards it, sides speckled with ports and lightwell apertures. The line vanished into the dark mouth of a tunnel in its base ringed by pulsing artificial lights. Suddenly they were inside and decelerating smoothly, sheltered from the perpetual buffeting of the wind. Steam jets and sets of ballooning airseal gaskets

passed the windows. Then the tunnel opened into a brightly lit station and they glided to a halt beside the platform.

On which a riot appeared to be in progress.

An angry mob was confronting a ragged line of uniformed men who stood between them and the train. As the *Express* appeared the anger of the protesters redoubled, and even through its insulated walls, Bernice could hear the rise and fall of their voices and the thud of stamping feet. It's spreading, she thought grimly.

From inside the train came a sympathetic murmur of rising alarm as she and Ferlane ran along the corridor to Bassit's office. Bassit was speaking to his viewphone as they entered. On the screen was a somewhat bedraggled woman in a Proctor's uniform.

'...it's no use, Mr Bassit,' she was saying in a weary but determined voice. 'News of the second murder has been carried on all the news channels. The station is virtually under siege. The people won't let anybody get off the train, unless they're all put into custody at once. I know it sounds irrational but that's how frightened they are. But we can't do that to thirty-odd innocent people merely on suspicion. In any case we haven't enough secure accommodation. Then there have been fights with others who have relatives or friends on board and who want them off and out of danger. It's a nightmare... I've never seen anything like it.'

Ferlane introduced himself and said, 'Just give us the men we were promised and we'll keep going.'

'I'm sorry, but I simply can't spare them. I need them here to keep order. Frankly I don't think the people would stand having the train doors opened. They'd think somebody was trying to leave. You'll have to go on as you are.'

'But this is a scheduled stop,' Bassit protested. 'What will head office say?'

'They'll say you had no other choice and were only acting under police advice,' Bernice said. 'Unless you want your train smashed up. Make the announcement to the passengers and tell the driver full steam ahead.'

'Pardon?'

‘Never mind. We’ll work something else out, but for now just get us out of here.’

‘Do it,’ Ferlane confirmed.

As they headed back down the train to mollify the angry passengers, he added, ‘Now I know what it’s like to be carrying some sort of plague!’

## HEAVY WEATHER

Bernice frowned at the view through the window and checked her watch. 'Is it my imagination or is it getting dark rather early, even allowing for us travelling north?'

The normal ochre tint of the boiling clouds overhead was darkening to umber and purple, highlighting the lightning forks that played about their undersides.

'You're right,' Ferlane agreed. 'It looks like there's a change on the way. Let's go and get the latest forecast from Bassit.'

They were in the last of the Economy cars, just before the freight section. They had been making a show of their presence by slowly walking the length of the train like policemen on the beat, talking to the passengers and trying to reassure them after the disturbing scenes at Roaring Canyon. Much as she disliked the idea, Bernice would have preferred to have some sort of uniform to wear. In the closed environment it would have given them a useful psychological advantage. Even a silver star marked DEPUTY would have helped.

They had almost reached Bassit's office in Service 1, when his voice came over the public address speakers.

'Your attention, please. We have received notification of a severe storm system building ahead of us over the entire Tharus region. There is estimated to be a fifty-five per cent chance of class ten turbulence and precipitation conditions. Therefore we must reduce speed to comply with safety directives until conditions improve. Thank you.'

They felt the train slowing even as he finished speaking.

'We wanted a tail wind, not this,' Bernice said angrily, making for Bassit's door.

'Never rely on the weather on Tempest,' Ferlane said.

Bassit looked up tiredly as they entered. 'You heard?'

'We couldn't miss it. How long is it going to delay us?'

'Half a day, perhaps.'

'Any other news?'

'I was just going to call you.' He handed over some fresh police department printouts. 'They concern Mr Merch. It seems he left his previous employment under something of a cloud.'

'Then why did he want to come to Tempest?' Bernice said gloomily. 'Sorry, that just slipped out. It must be the weather.'

Ferlane was reading the sheets rapidly. 'His previous employers were Gallard & Row of Fomalhout, dealers in rare and precious gems. So it wasn't just a hobby with him, he really knew his stuff.'

'Why did he leave?' Bernice asked. 'Selling powered furniture seems a less prestigious profession.'

'Mmm. Apparently a small parcel of stones went missing. Merch was suspected but nothing could be proven. He "voluntarily" took early retirement to save everybody any further inconvenience, but all along he maintained he was innocent.'

'Did he now, that's very interesting,' Bernice mused. 'Even supposing he was innocent then, he might still be embittered enough to try his hand at the real thing, since he's already been branded a thief anyway. And if he was guilty, stealing the Innulate would just be another step up the ladder.'

'And working with gems he might have learnt something about security systems?' suggested Bassit.

'Maybe,' Ferlane agreed. 'But we didn't find anything suspicious amongst his possessions.'

'Apart from the missing phone and computer cores,' Bernice reminded him. 'What was in those? Some sort of special code-cracker program that he used to open the MaxSec case?'

'Even if that's true, it still doesn't tell us who killed him,' Bassit said. 'Did Merch have a partner on board, or did he stumble on to some clue as to who the original thief was?'



‘But then why didn’t he tell us?’ Ferlane snapped angrily.

‘People don’t always behave rationally,’ Bernice said. ‘Or at least, they don’t seem to. By his own reasoning, whatever Merch did or didn’t do must have seemed perfectly logical. Now if we can only unravel that...’ She frowned. ‘What was Yorland saying about Merch’s phone line earlier when -’

Bassit’s phone interrupted her. It was Commissioner Hynds.

‘I thought you’d like to know that we’re putting a team on your sister train, the *Equatorial Express*. She’ll be leaving Thule in a couple of hours. Depending on travelling conditions TGR will work out the best rendezvous for you, and the team will transfer on board. That should save almost a day. With the level of public anxiety about this case rising I don’t want to see what happened at Roaring Canyon repeat itself in Thule.’

‘You’d really like us to roll in with the case solved, the Imnulate found and the culprit handcuffed ready and waiting for you,’ Bernice said.

‘I would,’ said Hynds, without any trace of sarcasm.

They made no further progress on the investigation for the rest of the day. Bernice, Ferlane, Bassit and Pell talked at length. They constructed and demolished a dozen hypotheses implicating everybody in Car A in the crime, including themselves.

‘Let’s face it,’ said Ferlane, ‘I’m a better suspect than some of them. And in a great position to lead the investigation astray.’

But he could still not explain how he could have removed the Imnulate from the MaxSec case.

Bernice wished the train was travelling faster. Forget pride. Let them rendezvous with the professionals and hand the whole thing over to them as soon as possible. But the howling wind outside denied her wishes. She had to be content with travelling at a mere hundred kph in conditions that would have blown any other train in the sector off its tracks. At least it made sightseeing easier.

Through a break in the torrential rain they saw a herd of windmill trees: short squat trunks with widespread roots, facing into the prevailing wind that set their rigid leaf vanes spinning. Jointed stems transmitted the motion to specialized drill roots that burrowed into the ground after minerals. Other modified roots carried rotating blades that slashed at any growth not of the same stock. A few trees edged forward against the wind, using their retracted drills as simple wheels. Their progress in the teeth of the gale was painfully slow.

Bernice knew how that felt.

Dinner that evening was well attended, which Bernice thought would please Jean-Louis.

News of the planned rendezvous with the professionals may have helped, Bernice speculated as she waited for Ferlane, but perhaps there was also a limit to the time you could shut yourself away from everybody. The ancient phrase 'stir crazy' came to mind.

The Astall family were present again among others. She had a few words with them mainly for the sake of their young girl, who she learnt was called Tallia, and who was the only child in the First Class carriages. Her parents, Lance and Nyris, were trying to remain cheerful, but Tallia was clearly aware that something was wrong.

Bernice also tried to observe the rest of the diners, especially the A car occupants among the B car diners. She was hoping to spot something that would be useful, even though she had no idea what it might be. But it was not easy to keep track as Bassit had adjusted some seats, not only to cover the absence of Merch but to avoid undesirable confrontations.

Costermann arrived early, she noticed, apparently determined to put on a brave face. He looked a little fresher than he had that morning. Bassit had seated him well away from both the Sommers and Denn Lankril, who all made their appearances shortly afterwards. Bernice saw the swift sad look Clarris Sommers cast after Lankril as he walked

past them to his own table. Bernice wondered if the Versons were going to show, but they arrived just as the first orders were being taken, looking as composed and loving as always. Klemp and his entire entourage came in a minute after them, causing several heads to turn. Was he making a public show to dispel any suspicion of guilt? She noticed both Costermann and Sommers senior looking at them with open distaste. It was probably the only thing they had in common, she thought.

Finally Ferlane appeared and slid hastily into his seat opposite.

'Head office went on longer than I thought,' he said by way of apology, punching out a rapid order on the menu pad with an angry finger. 'They can't understand why we're not making any progress. They seem to think we should be knee-deep in clues by now and breathing down the neck of our prime suspect.'

'But surely they know you're doing everything you can?'

'They want results not excuses.'

'But there are no clues, in the classic sense, to find. Nor any fragile alibis to break down.' She paused, frowning deeply. 'I wonder... is that a clue in itself?'

He scowled across at her. 'How do you mean?'

'That there is such a paucity of hard evidence. Perhaps we're not getting any answers because we're asking the wrong questions. Is one of our fundamental assumptions erroneous?'

'But what else is there to assume? The Imnulate's been stolen and two people are dead. Fact. All the evidence we have to go on are shadows on a monitor and a handful of people with motives, equal opportunity, but no serious means.' He looked depressed, and Bernice reminded herself that he had been responsible for the safe arrival of the Imnulate, and was the obvious scapegoat when it came time to apportion blame.

They ate the rest of their meal in silence.

The last of the coffee and biscuits were consumed and people began to drift out of the car, some up to the lounge in

an effort to make merry, others back to their compartments. She watched the Versons go back to the A car together. Costermann and Sommers both waited until they saw Klemp was going up to the lounge, then went in the other direction.

As Bernice and Ferlane were leaving, Wilver rose from his seat by the door and intercepted them.

'Your pardon, deputies,' he said, tipping his hat, 'but how are you going to pursue the investigation until the projected rendezvous with the *Equatorial Express*? Will our reduction in velocity cause you to change your plans?'

'Not at all,' Ferlane said firmly.

Wilver shivered his tentacles, presumably in satisfaction. 'That is pleasing. I was concerned you had given up hope of finding the perpetrator of the crimes and recovering the religious artifact.'

'Does the theft of the Imnulate mean anything to you personally?' Bernice wondered.

'Only as far as it bothersomely interferes with my intended schedule,' Wilver said. 'My kind are rationalists. We concern ourselves only with what is. This idol seems to inspire concern beyond its material price. It is hard to comprehend such thinking, but then much of humanoid society I find puzzling, though I must function within it. Only proper manners and politenesses do I understand.' He tipped his hat again. 'I trust I do not offend by speaking so.'

'Not at all,' said Bernice, and smiled as the small alien waddled rapidly away. He was passed in the corridor by Warwick Verson heading back towards the dining car with an untypically grave look on his face.

'You'd better take a look at our room,' he said to them. 'Somebody's been in there while we were at dinner.'

The Versons' compartment did not appear, at first glance, to have been unlawfully entered. But Bernice had no doubt somebody had been in there. Small things were out of place.

'I'm sure that drawer was fully closed when we left for dinner,' Ellyn Verson explained, indicating the lowest of a bank of three on the left of the dressing table. 'And my make-

up case was not so far back as to be touching the mirror as it is now.'

'And my clothes on the hangers in the wardrobe are pushed to one side,' Warwick Verson added. 'They were more to the middle earlier.'

'And you're sure this happened over dinner?' said Ferlane.

'We went straight there and straight back, so it could only have happened then,' Warwick Verson said.

'Is anything missing?'

'We haven't really looked yet. We thought we'd better call you first.'

'Well, please check now.'

As they examined their possessions Bassit entered in response to their call. Bernice explained about the suspected intruder.

'Well, none of the stewards would have had any reason to come in here,' Bassit said firmly. 'And this is not the time the 'servers are scheduled to do their cleaning.'

Ferlane had been examining the door as they were speaking. Now he pointed to a slight indentation on the jamb opposite the lock.

'The bolt's been very neatly forced,' he said. 'I'd say this whole room has been very rapidly but professionally searched.' The Versons looked at him in dismay. 'Is there anything missing?' he asked.

'Not that we can see,' Ellyn Verson said.

'No money or valuables, even small items?' Bernice asked.

'No.'

'Then what was the intruder after? Unless...' She looked at them thoughtfully for a moment, then said quite mildly, 'I think you're both Drellites.'

The couple gaped at her in surprise for a moment, then Warwick Verson recovered himself. 'Yes, Professor Summerfield, we do follow the way of Drell. May I ask how you know that?'

Bernice smiled. 'Just a hunch. Bassit reminded me you were absent from meals at regular intervals, and even late for that interview with us. Perhaps you had biorhythm trouble,

but you seem too bright and well adjusted to suffer from sleeping problems. I'm just guessing, but were you performing some religious observance at those times?'

'We were. Special prayers are planned according to Karnor time.'

'I see,' said Bernice. 'Well, I think somebody else noticed the same thing I did, but put them together rather faster and thought you might have something to do with the Innulate's disappearance. That's why your compartment has been searched.'

'I swear to you,' Warwick Verson said, 'that if the Innulate of Drell had come into our possession while we were on this train, then we would have handed it over immediately to Mr Bassit to be put in his safe.'

'But don't you want the Innulate?' Ferlane asked curiously.

'Of course, but not by theft or deception. Our church is prepared to pay a fair price for its return.'

'But isn't it of great spiritual value to you?'

Ellyn Verson smiled with warmth and sadness. 'It is, Professor. You cannot begin to understand.'

'I think you'd better try to explain,' said Ferlane.

Five minutes later they were all seated around the table in Bassit's office with the recorder running.

'In light of your admission just now, perhaps you would care to amend the statements you made earlier,' Ferlane told them.

'I'm not sure what else there is to tell,' said Warwick Verson.

'For a start, why didn't you tell us you were followers of Drell?'

'Surely our religious beliefs are a private matter for us alone.'

'Nothing's private where murder's concerned,' Ferlane retorted. 'Especially when your own church's prize idol's at the bottom of it.'

‘Please,’ Ellyn Verson said gently, ‘let us not allow anger to darken our spirits. Mr Ferlane, we admit that we thought it better not to reveal our beliefs earlier, because if you mistakenly suspected us it would interfere with the recovery of the Immulate.’

‘And you still maintain you’re innocent of any involvement in the theft, and that you have had no links with Nathan Costermann?’ Ferlane said. ‘We will check, you know.’

‘Check if you want, but you will find nothing.’

‘We’ll see about that. But you admit it’s not chance you’re on this train?’

‘No. We knew the Immulate would be on board.’

‘How?’

‘It was announced at a meeting of our church.’

‘Announced!’ Ferlane ran his fingers through his hair angrily, muttering to himself. ‘That leak again! But who, who?’

‘Perhaps we should explain why we were chosen to accompany the Immulate?’ said Warwick Verson.

‘Please,’ said Bernice.

‘Very simply, it is our duty to prepare for its return. Certain prayers should be said as close to the Immulate as possible to ease the way. A sort of cleansing process, you might call it.’

‘You don’t believe a hunk of crystal, however prettily shaped, has actual power? Feelings?’ exclaimed Ferlane.

The Versons remained unmoved. ‘It has whatever people choose to put into it,’ said Ellyn. ‘It is a focus of hopes and fears. Yes, you might say it has power to those who believe. That is one of the cornerstones of our faith. There are Drell temples on most worlds: small, discreet gathering places where the faithful can worship undisturbed. Ours, in First Landing City on Hanson’s World, for instance, is in a basement room of a department store owned by one of the members of our congregation. We do not seek aggrandizement. We believe in universal brotherhood, mutual tolerance, respect for local secular law and custom, and the certainty of an afterlife for those who have lived according to Drell’s word.’ Ellyn smiled slightly. ‘Much to the

disappointment of the news media we do not indulge in sensational faith healing, sexual orgies, or human sacrifice. And so, largely ignored, we have steadily been growing...' She hesitated.

'But?' Bernice prompted.

'But many years ago there was a schism in our faith. It was something we were ashamed of and not widely publicized. There arose a faction called the Keddd-Drell, in the holy tongue. While we still believed the Imnulate to represent universal brotherhood despite the inherent diversity of life, the Keddd said it was a symbol of the inevitable ultimate unification of all races under the Drell faith. A small but horribly significant difference.'

'I don't get it,' said Ferlane.

'The Keddd believe the unification should be actively promoted by whatever means necessary,' said Warwick Verson heavily. '*Whatever means*, you understand? If they regain the Imnulate it will be seen as a symbolic victory by many of those undecided members of our faith. It may sound melodramatic, but it could mean a holy war.'

Later, Pell, Bassit, Bernice and Ferlane sat in Bassit's room talking over the Versons' revelation.

'This is why I stay within the realms of science,' said Pell. 'How otherwise sane and ordinary people can believe such mystical nonsense is beyond me.'

'But they do,' said Bernice, 'and we've got to deal with the consequences. Does this make the Versons any more likely as suspects?'

Bassit shook his head. 'Whatever their beliefs, I cannot imagine them committing murder. And I suppose,' he added, 'we must now investigate all our suspects' religious beliefs. But how do we go about that?'

'Assuming the Versons' compartment was really searched and they haven't staged it all for some reason, it brings us back to our unknown X,' said Ferlane.

'If it happened during dinner, who wasn't there?' Bernice wondered.



‘I think all of the A car occupants attended,’ said Bassit. ‘Jean-Louis was most gratified.’

‘Who arrived late?’ Bernice wondered. ‘I couldn’t see the whole length of the car. All I can say for sure is it wasn’t Costermann, either of the Sommers, Lankril or Klemp’s crowd. No... hold on. They came in after the Versions. They might just have had the time if they worked together.’

‘I regret I did not notice,’ said Bassit. ‘When I came through I think everybody was eating.’

‘A few of the B car passengers trailed in after me,’ said Ferlane, ‘and I was one of the last, but I didn’t notice who was seated. Too much on my mind. I suppose any one of them could have done it with little risk of being seen once everybody from A had come through, then slipped in unnoticed.’

‘We can tell by the times their orders were logged,’ said Pell suddenly.

‘Some people take their time over ordering.’ Bassit pointed out. ‘It is no proof of when they sat down.’

‘Well, I’m going to call my office and the police and get them to do some serious checking on Costermann’s social and business life, including every company he has the slightest interest in,’ Ferlane announced decisively. ‘And if I find the Versions have any link whatsoever with any of them, I’m going to bring them in again. And I’ll get them to send everything they have on Merch’s old firm and see if there’s anything there - including religious beliefs if anything’s known.’

The others nodded. Then Pell said, ‘One thing occurs to me. The Versions have warned us about this fanatical-sounding faction of their sect who might be capable of anything, and now we are diverting some of our efforts to seeking them out. But none of us have ever heard of them before. How do we know they even exist?’

Bassit’s phone beeped, breaking the thoughtful silence. He answered it and Anneka Neelson’s face appeared. ‘I’m afraid I have some bad news for you,’ she said flatly. ‘It’ll be on all

the channels in a few minutes, but I just thought you should be ready...'

'There has been a serious accident involving the *Equatorial Express*,' the stern-faced announcer said. 'First indications suggest a major drive system failure, which has immobilized the train on the edge of the north polar zone.'

A graphic route map of the line appeared on the screen, with a flashing circle marking the location of the accident.

'There are no details yet of any casualties. An emergency tender has already left Thule. On board the *Equatorial Express* was the police team due to rendezvous with the *Polar Express* to investigate the theft of the famous Drell Imnulate and a double murder. Now it seems unlikely that they will be able to make their planned transfer. It is even possible the *Polar* may reach the scene of the accident before the line can be cleared and the *Equatorial* recovered. We will bring you further details in our next regular bulletin. Meanwhile, anybody who may have had friends or relatives on board the *Equatorial Express* should contact

'Perhaps the Drell god doesn't want his idol auctioned,' Ferlane said, switching off the newscast.

The phone rang again and Commissioner Hynds came on the line.

'You've heard what's happened,' he said bluntly. 'Picking up the team from the *Equatorial* will only save you a few hours now, so unless it's still blocking the line, forget them. There's nothing else left for you to do but get to Thule without any further delay.' He scowled. 'If there's a riot when you arrive, we'll just have to deal with it as best we can.'

### **From the diary of Professor Bernice Summerfield**

If I was superstitious I would say somebody up there has got it in for us. I keep wondering if I've offended some supernatural entity. Perhaps there is a Drell god as Ferlane said.

I don't like the thought of religion complicating the investigation. People are hard enough to understand as it is, without adding that dimension. Of course the Versons seem perfectly charming, if a little dull. But who knows? Could they secretly be religious fanatics - far more dangerous than the foaming-at-the-mouth variety? Religious belief can be twisted around to provide sanction for any sort of activity. Personally I'm suspicious about anybody who claims to have an exclusive hotline to all the answers, and then tells you not to ask awkward questions.

The weather hasn't helped, and after the news about the *Equatorial Express* you could cut the gloom with a knife. The trouble is I keep feeling I'm missing something, but I'm too tired or stupid to see it. I could do with a real drink, but Tempest is no place for considered thought lubricated by alcohol when you've got work to do. The night crowds in too fast and hangovers persist too far into the next day.

I hope things get better tomorrow.

*Extract ends*

It had taken over a day, but Owen Rosen had at last recovered a large measure of his self-confidence.

His unauthorized activity had gone unnoticed, and with every passing hour he was less likely to be associated with Smith's device even if it should be found by some wild chance. He had sent the coded message confirming the installation to the number that had been given with his instructions. Later he had received an innocuous-seeming reply on his personal line including a code word indicating the device had been activated successfully. Now all he had to do was wait for his promised reward.

And it was while he waited that he started taking notice of the news for the first time in three days. All his colleagues had been talking about it, of course, but their chatter hadn't penetrated the fog of his anxiety. The news of the accident involving the *Equatorial Express* had only served to concentrate the news media's attention on the railways, and had not displaced their leading story which seemed to be growing more sensational by the hour.

SECOND MURDER ON THE *POLAR EXPRESS* the headlines all shouted. He listened and read slowly, calling up the previous day's newsfile dumps to check back on the earlier reports, all the while a terrible suspicion was growing inside him.

Could it be a coincidence?

Smith had spent thousands buying up his IOUs, so he must be expecting some substantial reward for his trouble. And at this moment the most valuable item on Tempest seemed to be Nathan Costermann's Drell Imnulate.

Which had just been stolen.

Was Smith somehow associated with what had happened? And therefore was he also implicated with murder? He had no idea what part the device was intended to play in his schemes, but he could make some good guesses. What if the device were found now, not as part of some petty smuggling racket, but major theft and murder? He'd have to disconnect it and risk the consequences.

No, wait a minute. He had been dealt a new hand now.

What if the device were found... by *himself*.

An hour later he was typing out a message to Smith's contact number: IMPORTANT, CALL ME AT ONCE. R.

The sudden deceleration woke Bernice from an uneasy sleep. There was no scream of locked wheels, of course, but she felt the pressure trying to roll her out of bed and braced herself against it. Then the *Express* came to a halt, trembling slightly in the buffeting wind. Her bedside clock showed it was half past three in the morning. There were no lights beyond her window blinds, only the flicker of lightning.

Please, don't let it be another one. she thought desperately as she threw on her gown and scuffed her feet into her slippers. The gun and holster Bassit had issued her lay beside her bed. After a moment's hesitation she strapped it on incongruously over her gown (sleep dressed until this is over, she reminded herself) then opened her door.

A few heads were already peering out cautiously into the corridor as she headed up towards Service 1. She saw Warwick Verson opposite her and Brandon standing alertly in the door of his own compartment. 'Just stay where you are, I'm going to find out what's happening,' she reassured them.

In Service 1 she caught up with Ferlane and Bassit heading forward towards the engine.

Ferlane was dressed as he had volunteered to take the corridor patrol that night, and Dassit was, as always, in uniform. (When did he sleep she wondered fleetingly - in between journeys?)

'What's wrong?' she asked, joining on the tail of the procession.

‘Murcell says the line’s blocked,’ said Bassit. ‘We’re just going to take a look.’

The cab was dark save for the multicoloured glows of the instrument panels. First Driver Murcell was seated before them in an imposing chair almost the equal of a spacepilot’s. ‘The train is locked and stabilized, Mr Bassit,’ he reported. ‘Emergency stop completed without damage.’

Harsh white light from the *Express*’s main track lamp reflected back into the cab through its large curved and sloping forward windshield. Torrential rain beat down upon it, only to be deflected a centimetre short of the glass by its static clearview charge. Through the haze Bernice could see that for twenty metres in front of them the track ran straight and true. Then it vanished into a dark mass of earth, rock and twisted plant stems at least two metres deep, that seemed to have been poured across the monorail from some unseen source to their right.

The night sky was illuminated by multiple forks of lightning ripping through the inverted cloudscape, and Bernice caught a brief flashlit impression of their surroundings.

They were on one flank of a steep-sided valley, with a white water torrent boiling along its bottom fed by many rivulets and flood streams. Though the track was raised on its pylons five metres clear of the ground, a huge mass of material must have been loosened by the rain and slumped down from the slopes above them, burying the track in its wake.

‘Is the track still sound?’ Bassit asked anxiously.

‘Looks like it,’ said Murcell. ‘The test grid shows no fractures, stress is within tolerance levels and the main comm circuit seems untouched.’

Bassit breathed an audible sigh of relief, and touched his lapel button.

‘Your attention, please.’ His voice echoed over the public speakers. ‘As you will all no doubt be aware, we have made an unscheduled stop. This is because the track ahead of us has been blocked by a landslide. However, the track seems otherwise undamaged and all communications are still functioning normally, so there is no cause for alarm. We shall

assess the situation further when it gets light. Meanwhile we are perfectly safe where we are, and I recommend you return to your beds.'

He turned to the others. 'As soon as the weather eases, Mr Yorland can go out and make an inspection.'

'Can we clear this sort of blockage ourselves?' Bernice asked.

'Possibly, Professor. That depends on how wide it is.'

'I think the passengers would rather we didn't have to wait for help,' Ferlane remarked.

'So do I,' Bassit admitted, looking out into the wild night once more. 'But at least it's the sort of problem we are prepared for and know how to deal with.'

Bernice thought he actually seemed relieved by the prospect. It said a lot about their situation when a landslide could be seen as a welcome diversion.

Rosen was still sitting by his console anxiously watching the clock when Smith's reply came through a little over six minutes after he had sent his request.

WHAT IS YOUR PROBLEM? S.

There was no reason why this private line should be monitored, but Smith was clearly taking no chances by mentioning any incriminating details. He composed a reply in a suitably elliptical manner.

UNIT LIKELY TO BE FOUND IF DETAILED INSPECTION ORDERED. ADDITION OF HALF OF RECOVERED ITEMS PROMISED IN MORE LIQUID FORM WILL PREVENT THIS. R.

There: he was committed. Smith would understand that he had guessed the high stakes they were playing for, and that he was threatening to 'find' the device himself unless he was paid an additional half of the value of his IOUs in cash. If Rosen reasoned correctly. Smith did not have the time to argue or make other arrangements. If Smith called his bluff, there was a fair chance his 'discovery' of the device would allow him to survive any subsequent revelations about his gambling debts.

Though it seemed subjectively much longer. Smith's reply once again came back in just over six minutes. Rosen wondered if the interval was significant. He'd assumed Smith was somewhere on Tempest, but perhaps he was out in space. If so the delay might represent the time the signals took at lightspeed to make the journey there and back.

But such idle speculations were wiped from his mind when he read the complete message.

ADDITIONAL PERSONAL CONSIDERATION AGREED.  
TRANSACTION WILL BE PUT IN HAND. S.

Rosen read it over three times before deleting it from the display and the system memory. He felt a strange mixture of elation and fear, just like the sensation of being on a winning streak. Yes, it was all a sort of game and he was playing his hand to the full and raising the stakes as far as he dared. He hadn't wanted any of this, but it was his chance to get ahead and he wasn't going to lose out, whatever the risk.

As soon as the storm had abated and before the first flush of dawn silhouetted the dark peaks about them, Yorland left the forward service car hatch and made his way along the track to examine the landslip. Even though the wind had lessened he was wearing a safety line which clipped into a groove in the track top. He was outside for twenty minutes, and by the time he returned the valley was beginning to fill with dull ochre light. He left his suit airing off in the locker room and came through to Bassit's office. Neelson was on the phone and listened as he made his report.

'No damage to the track or supports that I can see. Luckily the slip was mostly small stuff - no large rocks. Straightforward enough. There's about sixty or seventy cubic metres of debris to move, and some shoring up of the slip above the track as we go to stabilize it so that it doesn't slump again. Using all the available crew, I'd say it's going to take six to eight hours to clear.'

'I'll help,' said Bernice. 'Digging is something I've had plenty of experience with. I might as well be doing something practical than kicking my heels in here. We seem to have



reached a dead end as far as this investigation goes.' She raised an eyebrow questioningly at Ferlane.

'Oh, sure,' he said. 'I'll give a hand once the rest of the data I asked for has come through.'

Bernice eyed him thoughtfully, thinking he seemed a little distracted. 'Found something interesting?'

Ferlane gave a half grin. 'I'm not sure yet. Just a hunch. Trying to think laterally. Probably come to nothing.'

Bassit was still considering their immediate problem. 'We might ask for able-bodied volunteers from among the passengers,' he suggested. 'It has been done in similar situations before, and I believe it will provide a useful diversion.'

Pell agreed. 'Our killer, even if he or she was among the labourers, would hardly be likely to attempt to escape out here, and it may help some of the more restless types burn off excess energy.'

'Very well,' said Neelson over the phone. 'But make sure they sign the usual waivers before they go out.'

'I'll only take people who've had plenty of experience working suited-up,' Yorland promised.

'The latest weather predictions suggest you will have a few hours of relative calm coming up, so make the most of them,' Neelson said.

The request for volunteers brought twenty-five people to Bassit's office, from which Yorland selected fifteen men and three women who were both physically capable of the work and experienced with using suits in such conditions, something that not all Temperites were. Klemp generously sent Deek along. Costermann appeared already dressed in his suit holding his helmet under his arm.

'I may not be at my best at the moment, but I can do something. I've had some experience of working outside in the past.'

He seemed genuinely sorry when Pell vetoed his participation on medical grounds, but he was allowed to remain on standby should extra assistance be needed.

Denn Lankril was also among the volunteers and was accepted without question. Bernice noted his face bore a more serious expression than any she had yet seen. He caught her staring at him and hastily turned aside. Now there's a guilty look if I ever saw one, she thought. But guilty about what?

Wilver appeared to apologize. 'I am not physically capable of great heavy labour, but is there some ancillary tasks I can undertake so the work may be expedited?' He was given the job of checking tools out beside the airlock.

Tyne, who had heard the announcement like everybody else, hammered on the door of his room until it was opened.

'I was out on the surface of Klondyke quite a bit so I know how to move in a suit,' he explained, when they finally answered his call. 'I'm fit enough and I want to do something or I'll go crazy in here! You need all the help you can get and you know there's no way I'm going to run off.'

Yorland accepted his offer after both Ferlane and Bernice promised to keep a special watch over him. 'I'll be armed,' she reminded Tyne, 'and you don't want to find out how good a shot I am.'

'Take it easy,' said Tyne sincerely. 'I'll behave.'

After a hasty breakfast the workers were cycled through the hatch of Service 1 in groups. Bernice joined the first party with Tyne. Once outside they edged their way cautiously along the narrow path between the body of the *Express* and the lip of the track until they reached the point where the landslip rose up to engulf the line. Here they were able to step out on to the mass of churned earth and rock which formed a slope of about forty degrees.

'Watch your footing,' Yorland warned over their radios. 'It seems stable, but there are still plenty of loose rocks. Don't trip over them or try to stand on them, otherwise Pell will have sprained ankles to fix.'

As promised the wind had abated, meaning the gusts were only fifty or sixty kph. Bernice looked up at the hill looming above them, noting the dark scar where the landslide had

torn away from its parent. A little way down beyond the buried monorail line the slope of the debris formed a lip and became sharply steeper as the slip belled out. Perhaps three hundred metres below that was the valley floor and the torrent that raced along its course.

There were more workers than shovels so Yorland arranged them in relays, five minutes at a time, while others manhandled the large pieces of rock clear. As they began to work in along the line from either side of the slip, Yorland had another team start driving in lightweight tubular rods above them to stabilize the slope. In the absence of barrows they used two-metre squares of reinforced plastic sheet with loop handles, on to which earth could be heaped and dragged aside. That the *Express* carried such items as part of its standard equipment Bernice thought was very telling. Would people ever manage to totally conquer such a wild place as Tempest? A part of her hoped not.

Bernice shared the shovelling with Tyne. To do the would-be thief credit he worked well, but she didn't allow herself to become too impressed, doubting it was a sign of a miraculous conversion to the way of honest toil and putting most of his efforts down to self-interest. She couldn't blame him. It was good to be outside in the 'fresh air'. She could lose herself in the simple business of physical labour, or staring about her at the wild landscape while she rested. It was uncomplicated compared to an investigation that was getting nowhere, clouded by the abstractions of fear, greed and deceit. In a vague way she hoped the break would allow her mind to relax into free associations and magically turn up the solution to the whole business. But so far it didn't seem to be working.

After about half an hour Ferlane emerged to join them as he promised. He came over as Bernice was watching Tyne digging. What she could see of his expression through the faceplate of his helmet appeared intense and thoughtful.

'Did anything interesting come through?' she asked.

'I'm not sure. Just some ideas I'd like to try out on you... but not over an open channel. Wait till we're back inside.'

And he scrambled away over the slope to Yorland, who assigned him a digging job.

While the weather held they worked on determinedly. Despite the wind Bernice had to turn up her suit's cooling system, and her faceplate began to mist over as the dehumidifier laboured to absorb her sweat. While Tyne took his turn she watched the others. Deek was simply embracing boulders in his massive arms and heaving them clear of the line to bounce away down the hill and splash into the flooded river. Lankril drove his shovel almost viciously into the earth. He certainly had a lot of anger to work off. She estimated how much was left to clear. Another two hours might see them finished.

She saw Ferlane was also having a break from where he had been digging on the outer edge of the cut. He was turning from side to side in an apparent effort to stretch his back and arms. She waved and rubbed her own back in sympathy. He didn't respond, but instead took an unsteady step backwards as though the wind had caught him. The movement of his arms seemed oddly uncoordinated and his head was beginning to loll over, almost as though he was intoxicated.

A cold numbness overtook her. 'Somebody catch him!' she bellowed, springing forward.

Ferlane was now loitering dangerously on the very lip of the slide where the slope steepened. Alerted by her cry his digging partner looked round, threw down his shovel and made a lunge towards Ferlane. His hands closed on empty air as Ferlane toppled backwards and vanished from sight.

Bernice skidded to a halt on the lip of the scree and looked down.

Ferlane was already twenty metres below her, rolling over and over and gaining speed. He seemed to be making no attempt to check his fall. Instinct told her to go after him but common sense said it would be virtual suicide. The slope had to be almost seventy degrees. But to go round the broad swathe of the landslip and down by the gentler slopes of the hillside would take minutes - and if Ferlane's suit was

damaged, minutes could mean the difference between life and death.

In her earphones she could hear Yorland calling for ropes.

She looked round desperately and saw a loose drag sheet. She snatched it up, and, holding it over her head like a parachute, stepped over the edge.

Her feet dug ankle-deep into the loose material of the landslip which threatened to trip her up at every stride. But the billowing sheet helped keep her upright, catching some of the wind blowing up the slope and reducing the speed of her descent by a crucial metre or two per second. Down she plunged, starting miniature avalanches as she went. Ferlane was still rolling ahead of her, limp as a rag doll. She winced as she saw his head and shoulders strike a large rock. The contact turned him round so that his tumble became a head-down slither.

She had nearly reached the bottom of the scree slope when a trailing root hooked round her ankle. Momentum carried her forward, whipping her feet out from under her. Head over heels she went, losing hold of her improvised parachute and crashed on to her backpack, the impact knocking the breath from her. Another half tumble and she cracked her left arm against something hard. Sickening hot-cold pain burnt into her forearm and jolted up to her shoulder. She flailed about and turned her tumble into a slither like Ferlane's, but at least on her back.

The white water of the river was rushing up towards her. She was almost at the bottom of the valley. Then the slope became shallower as she hit firmer ground, her speed slackened, and, in a drift of earth and pebbles, she ground to a halt. She tried to sit up and felt the pain in her arm. There was a small rent in the tough fabric of her suit and dark blood was already seeping through it, but at least her helmet seemed intact.

She clasped the sides of the tear together and, cradling her injured arm, rolled over on to her knees. Lying very still just five metres away from her was Ferlane.

Bernice stumbled over to him. He was lying on his front. Grunting, one-handed, she rolled him over. There was a crazed starburst pattern of cracks disfiguring his faceplate. Beneath this she saw his eyes were closed. A trickle of blood was running down his forehead and his lips were tinged blue. She fumbled frantically with the controls on the side of his backpack, turning the oxygen pressure up to maximum. From the thigh pocket of his suit she pulled out an emergency patch, forced the fingers of her left hand to grasp its tab so she could peel the backing patch off, and slapped it over the crack in his faceplate.

Her eyes were beginning to sting and she became aware of a penetrating chemical smell. Her breathing system was contaminated and the native air was getting into her helmet. She turned up her own oxygen flow and then tried to pull an emergency patch from the pocket of her own suit.

But she found her legs didn't seem to want to support her any more. Slowly the ground came up and hit her again and everything went black.

## A SHADOW EXPLAINED

Bernice became aware of the reassuring features of Pell's face as it swam out of the blackness. Hands were pulling at her clothes, and there was a numbness where her left arm should be. She tried to speak, but her throat was raw and sore, and all she managed was a husky croak. Somebody lifted an oxygen mask from over her mouth and nose and put a spout to her lips. She swallowed a mouthful of water and the mask was replaced. At the next attempt she managed to whisper, 'Ferlane?'

'He's alive,' said Pell, his voice seeming unnaturally faint.

'See to him first...'

'We have...'

But she had already passed out again.

When she recovered for the second time she was lying under a warm blanket in a semi-reclining position on the couch in Pell's surgery. Her environment suit and outer clothes were gone, she dimly realized, and she was left dressed only in her underwear. Her left arm was extended on a rest and Pell was bending over it. It still felt quite numb. The rest of her body seemed to be one large bruise, but the pain was oddly distant. This troubled her for some reason, but by a supreme effort of concentration she rallied her confused thoughts until they came up with the possibility that she had been given painkilling drugs. Good. The world was starting to make sense again.

Then she remembered.

'Ferlane,' she choked out, trying to sit up. Her throat felt as though it had been sandpapered.

Pell looked up from his work. 'Lie still,' he commanded, 'or else I'll give you a general anaesthetic.'

She lay back gingerly.

Pell spoke as he worked: 'Mr Ferlane is next door and my assistant's watching over him. He's alive... just. You may have saved his life with that ridiculous trick of yours. I saw the start of it myself through the window and thought for a moment I'd be conducting two more post-mortems. I understand that the others who followed by a safer route took almost two minutes to reach you both. That difference may have been vital.'

'But... will he be all right?'

Pell hesitated, then spoke carefully. 'He suffered oxygen deprivation and a major skull fracture. He's lapsed into a coma. I have him on full monitoring and life support. The best thing we can do for him now is to get to Thule as soon as possible.'

'But he will recover?'

'I honestly don't know. A coma may last a few days or a few years. The state is still not fully understood. He may recover consciousness but suffer brain damage, to what degree I could not speculate.'

Feeling sick and very tired, Bernice lay still as Pell carefully wrapped what looked like a thin slab of jelly-like plastic around her forearm. She noticed a long thin red line in her flesh, surrounded by blue and purple bruising, which was covered by some sort of transparent tape.

'Apart from minor irritation to your eyes, throat and lungs from contact with the outside air, you sustained a deep laceration in the muscle and a hairline fracture of the radius,' Pell explained as he worked. 'Fortunately you lost relatively little blood.' Once the medical jelly was in place he played an ultraviolet torch over it. Bernice felt the plastic contract very slightly and then harden into a clear rigid shell. 'The cast will protect the superficial wound and give support to the bone while it heals. It will dissolve away by itself in two weeks if it's not removed earlier. The rest of your injuries consist of numerous minor contusions, which I have treated



and which should heal naturally. I advise against any strenuous activity for a week, and you will rest here for at least an hour before even attempting to stand, is that clear?’

‘Yes, Doctor,’ she said meekly. She didn’t feel like moving anywhere for the moment. She became aware of a slight rocking motion.

‘Are we under way?’

‘Yes. After the accident it became even more essential to clear the track as soon as possible. Using all available volunteers the work was completed in remarkably short time. Unless there are any further delays, we should be in Thule in the early hours of tomorrow morning.’

‘That’s good. The sooner the better.’ She blinked, trying to get her mind up to speed as Pell cleared his equipment away. ‘Doctor, why did Ferlane fall? He looked unsteady before he went over, almost as though he was drunk.’

‘Simple anoxia, apparently. I would say his breathing unit malfunctioned. The effects might appear similar to intoxication.’

‘A malfunction? Is somebody checking his suit out?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘Well, get Yorland to do it right now!’

‘Professor, please don’t get excited. I’ll pass on your request, but you must rest.’

‘AH right, Doctor. But do it right away. And make sure Ferlane’s not left alone for a moment. And where’s my gun?’

‘In the locker... but surely you don’t -’

‘Think! Supposing it wasn’t an accident? Whoever was responsible might try to finish the job!’

\* \* \*

Bernice lay still for an hour as ordered. There wasn’t anything she could do anyway and she needed to think, as far as her medically dulled mind would allow.

Out of the surgery window she watched the landscape roll swiftly by. It was growing colder and greyer. The light from the perpetual overcast was noticeably dimmer than the day before, signalling their progress over the curve of the world and the steadily reducing arc of the invisible sun.

They were passing through a fan forest. Each tree was formed out of radiating spiny branches filled in between with a mesh of fine twigs forming a single semi-circular fan ranging from one to five metres high, angled to stand side-on to the prevailing wind. A flock of kites shivered and flapped to and fro in their upper branches under the buffeting of the wind. The kites looked uncannily like their inanimate namesakes, having fiat rhomboid bodies and loose jointed trailing tails with hooked tips. They were one of the few native forms to have adapted to the winds which could carry them halfway round Tempest in a few days. Despite their tough skins and springy bones their mortality levels were incredibly high, apparently, but as a species they somehow survived. It was not a lifestyle Bernice envied, but it proved once again that nature would always take advantage of even the slimmest evolutionary niche.

Before her hour of enforced rest was up, Pell, Yorland and Bassit entered the surgery. They commiserated with her briefly, then, grim-faced, Yorland came to the point.

‘I’m ninety per cent certain Ferlane’s breathing unit was tampered with,’ he said. ‘The main oxygen feed line to the regulator valve was loose, so the effects built up gradually. The monitor circuit didn’t warn him because the gas sensor lead was also broken. It could just possibly have been the result of his fall, but I doubt it.’

‘And it was his own personal suit, so there was no trouble targeting him,’ Bernice mused. ‘How long would it have taken anybody to fix it that way?’

‘Only two minutes, if they knew what they were doing. Most people on Tempest who use their suits regularly and have taken the usual maintenance course would know how.’

‘Which I’ll bet covers all our suspects in Car A, apart from everybody who was part of the working party itself,’ said Bernice. ‘And with everybody, including most of the crew, either outside or watching the work through the windows, almost anybody could have visited the suit lockers unnoticed before Ferlane came out. You’d find out if the rest of the crew saw anybody was acting suspiciously just in case.’

'The trouble is people were going in and out all morning,' Yorland pointed out. 'Who'd notice if it wasn't their own suit they were checking over unless they looked closely?'

Bassit was looking confused. 'But why attack Mr Ferlane in the first place?'

'Because he must have been getting close enough to frighten our murderer. He hinted to me that he had a new angle, but he didn't want to talk about it outside.'

Bassit frowned. 'But if he hadn't talked to anybody about his suspicions, how did the murderer learn of them?'

Bernice blinked in surprise, then smacked the side of her head. 'My brain's not working. You're right: how did X know? Ferlane's suit had to have been worked on before he came out and spoke to me. Surely he wouldn't have been stupid enough to have already tried some sort of showdown without telling us?'

'He must have given himself away accidentally,' said Yorland. 'Perhaps he left something in his compartment which the killer found.'

'But why would the killer search Mr Ferlane's compartment in the first place?' Pell asked.

'Curiosity,' Yorland suggested. 'He wanted to know how the investigation was going.'

'It's possible I suppose,' Bernice said. 'You'd better check whether anybody was seen hanging around Ferlane's compartment as well. And we need copies of all the communications Ferlane received from his office over the last eight hours. Will you put through the request, Mr Bassit?'

'Certainly. But meanwhile, what shall we tell the passengers? Many of them have already been asking about Mr Ferlane's condition.'

'Including whoever was responsible, I should think, trying to find out if he, or she's, succeeded,' said Bernice. 'Or maybe they'll be clever enough not to ask in person or seem too concerned...' She threw up her hands in disgust. 'There's no end to second guessing!'

'Should we pretend what happened was an accident or not?' Pell asked.

‘For the moment I think we should,’ said Bernice. ‘No point in spreading alarm again. If Ferlane does come round we’ll learn what he was on to anyway.’

‘Supposing we let it be known he was expected to come out of it anytime.’ said Yorland. ‘That might force whoever did it to try again

‘And we’d be waiting for them!’ said Bassit excitedly.

‘I will not have my patients used as bait to trap a killer,’ said Pell. ‘And that’s final.’

‘In any case, would our target believe we’d leave Ferlane temptingly unattended in his condition?’ Bernice wondered, then shook her head. ‘We’ll hold the idea in reserve as a last resort.’ She looked at Pell again. ‘Now if you’ll let me get dressed and out of here, I need to borrow your patient’s thumb for a few seconds.’

Ferlane lay in one of the small sickrooms next to Pell’s surgery, cocooned in white sheets, breathing tubes and monitor lines. The display on the bedhead showed his pulse, respiration and brain activity.

Bernice looked down on his still white face and the purple bruise on his forehead. If only he could talk to them. What had he found, or at least what had the thief and killer thought he had found or was about to find? Had she seen it herself and missed it? Again the lingering feeling came over her that she was overlooking something obvious, somehow obscurely connected to life on Tempest. Was it the same thing that had made her feel insecure when she first boarded the *Express*?

She lifted Ferlane’s business case, which Bassit had brought from his room, up to the side of the bed. Pell gently moved Ferlane’s limp right hand, extended his thumb, and pressed it down on the case lock. There was a tiny click. She hoped it would signify the unlocking of clues.

Back in her compartment, after having assured Pell that she was fine and would not strain herself, Bernice checked over Ferlane’s notes and files.

Actually she felt far from fine. Her head pounded as though an entire orchestral percussion section had taken up residence in her cranium, and every few minutes she felt a wave of dizzy sickness rise up within her, forcing her to sit with her head bowed over her knees. But as soon as the nausea passed, she resumed her search. She knew she had no time to waste if she was going to solve the mystery of the Imnulate before they reached Thule.

She paused, reviewing her erratic thoughts.

The 'Mystery of the Imnulate'? She was beginning to sound like some fictional detective! Surely I'm mature enough not to play the glory seeker any more. But the words of her last lecture in Carlsbad came back to her, and she had to admit that she still secretly longed for that feeling of supreme triumph when a hard-fought goal was achieved. Perhaps when she no longer felt like that it would be time to retire.

Her examination revealed little of any use. There were copies of the police reports she had already seen, giving background information on their suspects and some extra files transmitted from his own office. She flipped through them, hoping for some enlightening margin notes in Ferlane's hand, but there were none, and in any case they were many hours old. What she was after probably came through that morning, judging from the change in his manner. He might not have had time to make a printout of it. Or wanted to. No doubt the latest reports, together with any notes he may have made, were still locked away in digital form in the micro-office within his business case. But its memory files would require his personal access code to unlock, and probably nobody but Ferlane himself knew that.

So once again, how had the murderer known? Ferlane wouldn't have let anybody see the case screen as he worked, and you couldn't profitably listen at the door to somebody reading, unless they were doing so aloud, which was hardly likely in this instance. She screwed up her eyes. Think, Summerfield, think!

And then it came to her.

Of course. So obvious. At last, one piece of the puzzle had fallen into place. She paused. No, two... or rather three.

'Yes!' she shouted aloud, punching the air with delight, then regretting it as she clutched her throbbing head again. All right, she told herself, but you need the proof. She looked at her watch: it was nearly lunchtime. Delegate. But do it in person.

As she was closing her door behind her, Denn Lankril came out of his compartment a little way down the corridor. As soon as he saw her he smiled, came over and shook her hand.

'That was smart work on the hill back there. Professor,' he complimented her frankly. 'Nobody else had the nerve to try the same thing. Where did you learn it?'

'I suppose you don't have much practice with parachutes on Tempest. Actually I didn't really think what I was doing.'

'Is Ferlane going to be all right?'

'We honestly don't know. He could be unconscious for some time.'

'That's too bad. I hope he pulls through.'

There was a tread on the stairs leading down from stateroom C. and Lucas and Clarris Sommers appeared. At the sight of them Lankril excused himself and walked stiffly away towards the dining car. To Bernice's surprise Lucas Sommers also came over to congratulate her.

'You showed considerable courage and ingenuity this morning,' he said. 'Just the sort of spirit the first pioneers on Tempest had.'

'You were very brave,' said Clarris.

'Exactly. The sort of behaviour our young people could learn from,' Sommers senior added meaningfully, at which Clarris's face fell.

She realized both Costermann and Wilver were in the corridor. They added their appreciation of her efforts and enquired after Ferlane's condition. They were joined by some B car passengers making their way towards the dining car, who added their congratulations in turn.

Finally escaping from her admirers, she made her way along to Service 1, where she found Yorland. She explained her idea and what she wanted him to do.

‘It makes sense,’ Yorland agreed. ‘Why didn’t I think of it earlier?’

‘Because we were all thinking too superficially, when actually somebody planned this in depth well in advance. Perhaps this’ll tell us who.’ She checked her watch. ‘They’ll all be at lunch now, so the coast should be clear.’

Bernice received a round of applause as she entered the dining car again. The Versons and Klemp and his party all joined in. It dawned on her that the passengers needed something positive to help dispel the pervasive mood of gloom and fear, and unwittingly she had provided them with that something. She smiled and bowed modestly, and quickly took her seat so that she could hide her face behind her menu pad. But it was not just her surprise and slight embarrassment she was hiding, it was the unintentional look of cynical realization that had followed.

She knew that one of those present, applauding her so heartily, secretly wished she had not been quite so heroic. She was aware of the pressure of her gun on her hip. Would it protect her if she was next on the list? What happened to Ferlane showed their opponent could be subtle as well as ruthless.

Yorland reported back after lunch, while she was updating Bassit and Pell on her suspicions.

‘It was where you guessed, but I don’t think it’ll help us much.’ He held up a small object sealed in a clear bag. It was a blackened wafer of plastic and metal. ‘It was already burnt out. Still, it does explain what one of those shadows was doing in the corridor.’

‘Too bad,’ Bernice said, turning the small device over in her hands, before handing it over to the others. ‘Would it have needed special equipment to operate?’

‘Just an ordinary link and a modest-sized computer with the right program. There are probably a hundred of them on board. And as soon as it burnt out you can bet its operating program was wiped automatically. At least, that’s how I’d have arranged it,’ he added.

‘I don’t think we can count on our opponent being foolish enough to leave anything incriminating around,’ Bernice sighed. ‘You might check for any others, but I think that’ll be the only one. Keep it for the police at Thule.’

The phone beeped, and papers started dropping into its hopper. Bassit checked the first of them.

‘These are duplicates of all the reports that were sent to Mr Ferlane, from the time we finished our discussion last night until he left the train this morning.’

‘Good,’ said Bernice. ‘I just hope what we want is in there.’



## DECEPTIONS AND REWARDS

### **From the diary of Professor Bernice Summerfield**

I've been poring over the information Ferlane requested for two hours and all I've got for my efforts is a renewed headache. As far as I could see there's nothing significant in them. At least, nothing that indicates a particular suspect.

As far as it's known the Versons had no known links with any interests of Costermann's. Corama Interstellar, Merch's employers, did have a distant connection with Costermann's own Integrated Polymers business, in that they both supplied equipment and materials to medical facilities on Tempest. Is that significant? In the same line of business there had been a minor scandal some years before, when one of Costermann's subsidiary companies had supplied sub-standard goods causing three deaths. Its manager had committed suicide over the affair. But I can't find any links with Corama or Merch in that.

The commercial interests of Sommers, the Lankril family and Klemp inevitably, given the scale of business on Tempest, overlap with those of Costermann and each other in places. There are several indications of mutual rivalry and conflicts of interest in the past, but nothing worse than that.

Which only leaves hidden transactions and personal hatreds and rivalries. And unfortunately such things are not usually well documented. Lucas Sommers still has the strongest motive in that department. But would he have stopped short at sticking a knife into Tralbet with Costermann at his mercy? If he could kill an innocent man just doing his job, why not somebody he hated?

But was Tralbet really innocent? Somebody was paying him off it seems, but inquiries have so far failed to discover who. Ferlane requested the latest information on the search that very morning and had received, the response only an hour before the 'accident'. If the killer learnt of that request did that seal Ferlane's fate?

But killing him wouldn't stop the facts reaching us eventually, so what was the point? Unless it was an inference or connection beyond the raw facts, which the killer thought Ferlane was about to make. If so why can't I see it as well? Is it sitting here right in front of me waiting for a leap of intuition?

My aching head! Try another angle.

Somebody had hated Costermann enough to see him hurt badly, at least according to the letter Tyne said he had received. Was the sender also our unknown killer? But why alert Tyne if they were going to become personally involved anyway? Unless they wanted a scapegoat or a diversion. Hmmm. Who'd been hurt in that medical scandal? Could the thief and killer be an aggrieved patient or relative? Did the manager have relatives who might blame Costermann for his death and want to take revenge? Can the police match names to people who might have had access to the details of the transfer of the Imnulate?

Well, it's a possibility and I'll have to find out. But I'll put the call through from Bassit's room direct. I think it'll be more secure like that.

*Extract ends*

Bernice went to check on Ferlane. There was no change in his condition, but it was reassuring to note that the steward on duty in the corridor outside the medical section was alert and armed.

In Bassit's office she explained what she wanted and he put through the request. Commissioner Hynds came on the line and they updated him on the situation.

‘Just concentrate on keeping things under control,’ he advised. ‘The weather looks set fair, so you should be able to make the final stretch at top speed.’

‘And what about the *Equatorial Express*, Commissioner?’ Bassit asked.

Bernice thought Hynds hesitated a second before answering. ‘The *Equatorial* is being brought back to Thule. We were just lucky there was no loss of life. The line will be clear by the time you get here. Don’t stop for anything.’

‘Is something wrong?’ Bernice asked.

Hynds frowned. ‘I have just been debating a new development with TGR management. We were going to contact you shortly anyway.’ He looked aside for a moment, then the screen split to reveal Anneka Neelson.

‘Mr Bassit,’ she said. ‘Could you bring your engineer in to hear this, please?’

Bassit looked nonplussed, but put through the call to Yorland, who arrived a minute later. Neelson continued:

‘There has been no official announcement as yet and we’re trying to keep the news from leaking out, but what happened to your sister train was no accident. We are virtually certain that an explosive device had been placed in one of the drive coil casings.’

There was a painful silence. Bernice said slowly, ‘And you think it may have some connection with what’s happening here? But our killer’s still on board and there’s no way they can get off. Unless they’ve got a suicidal streak in them, it doesn’t make sense.’

‘Agreed,’ Neelson said. ‘It may be a tragic coincidence. No threats or ransom demands have been received, but we cannot take that chance. Mr Yorland, you will carry out an inspection of all vulnerable areas immediately, without alarming the passengers. Needless to say they are not to be told of this.’

‘I understand,’ Yorland said gravely. ‘But I can’t check all the sub-systems and external units without halting the train.’

‘Do what you can. A full bomb squad team will be waiting for you. You’d better inform your driver. There are no suitable locations between your current position and Thule where you could evacuate the train, so on balance we think your best chance lies in speed.’

Yorland had left on his tour of inspection, leaving Bernice alone with Bassit. She thought the steward was looking haggard. Bassit was not an adventurous type, she thought, and he was struggling to cope with these disruptions to years of orderly routine.

‘Cheer up,’ she said gently. ‘I really don’t believe there’s a bomb on board. A few more hours and it’ll all be over.’

He managed a slight smile. ‘Thank you, Professor. I will try to hold that thought in mind. It’s just that we don’t seem to be making any progress. With what happened to Mr Ferlane, and now this...’

‘Well, at least we’ve explained one of our mystery shadows today. Now if we can only deal with the other perhaps we can narrow down the possibilities.’

‘Yes: the strange head. I’ve thought since that if only the ‘server’s routine that night had been slightly different they might have disturbed whoever it was, and we might have caught a better sight of them.’

‘Probably they knew the routine already and were careful to avoid them.’

‘Perhaps. Though of course they’d only have had to keep out of their path and their presence wouldn’t have been...’ He trailed off, a strange look spreading across his face. ‘Oh my. The ‘servers!’

‘What?’

Bassit pressed a button on his desk console. ‘The ‘servers. They’re so... what’s the word... ubiquitous.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘They’re not solid machinery!’

‘Ah...’

The 'server he'd summoned entered Bassit's office and came to a halt before his desk. Bassit and Bernice squatted down either side of it thoughtfully.

'You're right,' Bernice admitted. 'They are ubiquitous. We just accept them, don't we.'

The common model of 'server on Tempest was more primitive than the porters back on Dellah, being larger and without pseudo personalities. But as long as they functioned efficiently enough and brought drinks before they got warm, who cared about their mechanics? Bernice thought. Perhaps even Yorland hadn't thought of them when they had searched the train.

'Most functions and basic reprogramming can be controlled solely by voice commands,' Bassit explained.

'And if somebody knew the right override codes?'

'Exactly.' He addressed the machine. 'Command override Gamma two seven. Power down to maintenance mode. Release safety seals.'

The lights on the 'server's casing died, and with a click several access panels sprang open around its blocky body. The largest of these revealed the traction unit compartment. Bernice studied it and the cavity within intently, trying to picture the Imnulate manoeuvred into the space. It was an irregular shape, but in between the maze of cables and struts there might just have been room enough.

'With some padding to hold it in place it could just work. Can you get Yorland?'

The *Express's* engineer appeared a few minutes later, annoyed at being distracted from his work until Bernice explained.

'Remember the recording of the night of the theft. We saw 'servers passing through the doors. Now suppose one had been stopped in the coupler module, had the Imnulate placed inside it together with any other specialist gear X used, then was sent along to a certain location in one of the tourist or economy carriages. There X's accomplice removes the Imnulate, and hides it or gets off with it at Spume Lake before the alarm is raised. Meanwhile X has nothing

incriminating on him so doesn't need to leave the carriage during the crucial period, which was why we never saw anybody enter Car B.'

Yorland rubbed his chin thoughtfully, it's possible, I suppose, if you know how to handle 'servers. What do you want me to do?'

'Examine them to see if there are any physical signs of something being hidden inside them.'

'There are over fifty on board. We'll be in Thule before I'm done.'

'Well, can you check out their working logs, or something? Look for any breaks or irregularities.'

'That's easy enough. Come on.'

They crossed the corridor to the engineering monitor room, where Yorland set up the search program on his console. In a minute the activity graphs of the 'servers were flashing across the screens. Yorland and Bassit scanned them with experienced eyes, checking against their routine functions.

'Nothing out of the usual on that night,' Yorland said after they had scanned the relevant period. 'An individual machine's record may have been wiped, of course, but that would take some time and skill.'

'Extend the timeframe over the next two days,' said Bernice. 'We didn't make our search straight away. The Immolate might have been shuttled around inside one for some time.'

Yorland tapped away at the console.

'You don't think the Immolate could still be inside one of the 'servers?' Bassit said suddenly.

For a moment Yorland looked startled, then he shook his head. 'No. Its energy consumption would be higher carrying around the extra load. It would show up here...' He frowned at the screen. 'But there is one non-routine pattern over the last few days. Look: in A car the same 'server has been sent back and forth between stateroom C and compartment 7 fourteen times.'

'That's the Sommers and Mr Lankril,' said Bassit in surprise.

‘And that odd shadow on the monitor tape could have been moving outside Lankril’s door,’ Bernice mused. ‘I think I’m going to have another word with that young man.’

Denn Lankril sat in the interview chair in Bassit’s office, arms folded across his chest, and glared back defiantly at Bernice and Bassit.

‘As I told you before, I know nothing about the theft of Costermann’s damn idol, or the murder of Tralbet or Merch,’ he stated flatly. ‘Isn’t that good enough for you?’

‘Not any more,’ said Bernice. ‘You see, we have new evidence. According to the ‘server logs, there’s been quite a lot of unexplained traffic between your room and stateroom C. And then there’s this recording taken from the door monitors, showing somebody’s shadow moving about in the corridor on the night of the theft around the time we’re interested in. Whatever cast it might have been outside your door.’

She replayed the relevant section of the recording. Lankril looked at the enhanced image of the strangely formed head and shoulders with a genuinely puzzled frown for several seconds, then he started suddenly as though realization had dawned.

‘So you do recognize it?’ Bernice said.

‘Why didn’t you show me this before? Are you trying to trick me?’

‘Because we weren’t sure what to make of it at first, nor if it was going into one of the compartments or not. Now I think it was yours. Who or what was it?’

‘I swear it’s nothing to do with what you’re interested in,’ Lankril said stubbornly.

‘Unfortunately, in this business the police seem to want proof,’ Bernice said. ‘Hard facts, corroboration and so on. I know it’s a bore, but that’s the way it is.’

Lankril remained stubbornly silent.

‘Very well.’ said Bernice heavily. ‘If you won’t co-operate, I’ll just have to ask Clarris Sommers. And her father will want to know what’s going on as well -’

‘No! Wait...’ Lankril looked distressed, if I tell you, it doesn’t have to go any further?’

‘As long as it’s nothing to do with the investigation.’

Lankril took a deep breath. ‘That shadow was Clarris.’

‘But it doesn’t look at all like her,’ Bassit pointed out.

‘I know. She was wearing some sort of hair-curling cap. I laughed when I saw her, which didn’t go down too well. Anyway, she stayed in my compartment for about an hour we just talked and kissed a little, nothing else - then she went back to her own rooms.’

‘And you’ve been passing messages via the ‘servers ever since?’ Bernice said.

Lankril coloured further, but nodded. ‘Yes. Love letters, I suppose you’d call them. Well, we couldn’t meet or talk any other way. Clarris was worried her father would hear if we used the train phones, and he’d taken her own away. Can you imagine that! It’s archaic the way he treats her! So anyway I thought of the ‘servers. It was better than nothing. We use a similar model on our farm and I worked out how to reprogram them when I was a kid. It’s not hard -’

‘Good with robotic systems, are you?’ Bernice interjected.

‘Pretty handy. Do most of the farm maintenance myself. Why?’

‘Never mind. Go on.’

‘Well, I got the ‘server to drop the notes outside her room instead of ringing, or pass them to her under trays, then pick up the replies when she slid them under the door. I know it sounds ridiculous but there was no other way.’ He looked at them both intently, and for a moment he seemed to Bernice to be very young and innocent. ‘You won’t tell her father?’

‘We’re here to catch a thief and murderer, not to make moral judgements. As long as we can confirm your story discreetly with Clarris, her father doesn’t need to know.’

Lankril looked relieved, i don’t know when you’ll be able to get Clarris alone. He doesn’t let her out of his sight.’

But to their surprise Clarris Sommers was waiting by herself in the corridor outside Bassit’s room when they



emerged. She hugged Lankril as soon as he appeared, eyes wide with apprehension.

'I heard they'd asked you in here again,' she blurted out. 'I don't want you to get in any trouble. I managed to slip out. My father thinks I'm in my bedroom.'

Lankril held her hands tightly. 'I'm sorry, Clarris. I had to tell them about you visiting me the other night.'

'Come inside and tell me what happened without any prompting,' Bernice said to Clarris Sommers quickly. 'No, you wait here,\* she told Lankril.

Back inside the room Clarris took a seat, looking at them anxiously as Bassit switched on the recorder again. 'Denn won't get into any trouble, will he? I know he's rowed with Mr Costermann before, but he doesn't know anything about this Innulate thing.'

'He won't if you can confirm what he's told us about the night of the theft and first murder,' Bernice said reassuringly. 'Did you go to his room?'

'Yes.'

'What time?'

'About one twenty, I think.'

'And were you wearing something odd on your head?'

She clapped her hand to her mouth, suddenly stifling a relieved laugh. 'Yes. My style curling set. It's an antique. I used it earlier that evening just for something to do. Then I was so exhausted with worry over Father and Denn, I fell asleep with it still on. When I woke up I didn't want to waste any time taking it off, and I didn't expect to meet anybody, so it didn't matter. Denn laughed at me, though I think I gave him a shock when he first opened the door.'

'I'm sure you did. And when did you leave his compartment?'

'Oh... I was there more than an hour I think. It was gone two thirty at least.' She suddenly Hushed. 'We didn't do anything... you know, special. We just talked.'

No girl of your age should be quite *that* bashful, Bernice thought. Your father's sheltered you for too long. Aloud she

said, 'And you didn't see or hear anybody or anything while you were moving about the corridors or stairs?'

'No. It was true what I told you before, even though I wasn't in my room all the time. Only the usual sounds... water in the pipes, the wind, that sort of thing.'

'I see. And you're sure your father didn't wake at all?'

She looked suddenly downcast, i knew he'd sleep soundly all that night. That's why I risked seeing Denn. Father doesn't like to admit it, but he takes Somnanburol every so often to adjust... to our short days, you know. It's silly really. Lots of people have to, but he seems to think he should be able to manage by willpower alone.'

'So he was sound asleep all night?'

'Oh yes.'

'Well, I think that's all we need to know.'

'You won't tell my father?'

'No need. Now you'd better be getting back to him before

A loud voice rang out in the corridor, which caused Clarris to shrink back in her chair in dismay.

'What are you slouching about out here for, Lankril? Do you know where my daughter is?'

'Can't you bear to let her out of your sight for five minutes?' Denn Lankril replied.

'What do you mean by that?'

'Afraid she'll follow after your wife?'

Bernice rolled her eyes heavenward. The young idiot!

There came the sound of a blow. Bernice whipped open the door. Denn Lankril was holding a hand to his mouth from which a trickle of blood was running. Sommers faced him, his face livid and eyes blazing, fists clenched and raised menacingly.

'Stop or you're both under arrest!' Bernice rapped out, resting her hand meaningfully on the butt of her pistol, while silently wishing once again that she had a better symbol of authority.

Sommers swung his gaze angrily at her, then over her shoulder through the half open door. 'Clarris! What are you doing there?'

‘Helping us clear up a minor point involving the on-going investigation like a conscientious citizen,’ Bernice said quickly. ‘She came entirely voluntarily, and has been most helpful.’ She beckoned to Clarris before her father could speak again. ‘Thank you, Miss Sommers. Perhaps you would take your father back to your compartment now? Do remember what we said was confidential. In the interests of the investigation, please do not mention it to *anyone*.’ She hoped the girl would take the hint.

Clarris took her father’s arm and almost pulled him down the corridor, casting one quick pained glance over her shoulder at Denn Lankril. Once they had gone, Bernice also turned her gaze on Lankril, but far less favourably.

‘You’d better go along to the doctor to have that seen to. And do try to keep your mouth shut in future, if not for your sake then for Clarris.’

Lankril left in silence.

‘I hope those two young people will be reconciled eventually,’ said Bassit. ‘You can tell they really are in love. So sad.’

‘Mr Bassit, I do believe you’re a romantic at heart.’

Bassit smiled shyly. ‘I admit a preference for happy endings, Professor.’

‘Yes, well, romance can also be a bloody pain,’ Bernice exclaimed, returning them to reality as she led the way back into the office. ‘It’s just the sort of idiosyncratic human behaviour that makes a dog’s breakfast of things. We’ve been baffled by that shadow for two days, and now it turns out to have an almost laughably mundane explanation.’

‘But at least we’ve now eliminated a false lead.’

‘But it doesn’t get us any further. And now Lucas Sommers has no alibi.’

‘Sorry, I don’t see it.’

Bernice sighed. ‘This business is turning me into a suspicious and cynical specimen, and I was already cynical enough to start with. Look, suppose he only *pretended* to take his sleeping pills, then slipped out and committed the crime while his daughter was away. He’d just have had time.’

‘Using her as his alibi?’

‘Possibly. Or perhaps he didn’t even know she’d gone. That’s the trouble in this sort of situation; you stop believing in simple coincidence.’ She frowned glumly. ‘So, we know what the two illicit figures in the hall were doing, but we still have no idea how the Imnulate was removed from the case or from the train. That’s still the key to the whole thing.’

‘Mr Lankril admitted a familiarity with robotic devices.’

‘Farm machinery is a very long way from a MaxSec case. Unless Lankril is some sort of secret computer genius. But if he was, what’s he doing on a fungi farm?’

‘Because it’s his family business,’ Bassit pointed out simply.

Bassit’s link broke the thoughtful silence. He answered it and a stranger’s face appeared on the screen.

‘I’m Bob Rester, technical director of MaxSec Security. Sorry we were so long in returning Mr Ferlane’s call, but it took a while to get TGR to put us through. They seem to have a pretty tight filter on live calls to the *Express*.’

‘Do I understand Mr Ferlane called you, sir?’ Bassit asked.

‘Left a message last night. It seemed pretty urgent. We’ve already been contacted by his office, of course, and are standing by to make checks when you arrive, but he wanted to talk direct on a personal line. And now I understand he’s indisposed.’

‘He is, I’m afraid,’ Bernice cut in. ‘I’m Professor Bernice Summerfield, special constable for the TPD, part of the team handling the investigation on the spot. If you have any information Mr Ferlane requested that would help us. Please pass it on.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know what Mr Ferlane wanted exactly. I suppose it was more details of the functions of our model Ultra Five.’

‘Sorry?’

‘The security case in which a certain item was being transported.’

‘Ah, yes.’

‘Well, what would you like to know? I’m very happy to co-operate with the police, only please remember this is not a secure line.’

Bernice stared at him blankly. If only she knew what Ferlane had intended to ask, she might know the answer to everything.

### **From the diary of Professor Bernice Summerfield**

I wish I could talk things over with Ferlane. Pell and Bassit don’t have his imagination. Which is probably why he’s where he is now. Which leaves me talking to myself as usual.

So what about Denn Lankril?

He needs money and wants to marry Clarris Sommers. The Immulate is valuable and stealing it would certainly put him in Lucas Sommers’ favour. He may just have the technical ability to carry out the crime, is strong enough to have tackled Tralbet and probably had a grudge against him for the way he threw him out of Costermann’s party. And Clarris loves him enough to provide an alibi...

No, no, no. Too many holes. Besides, Denn Lankril and Clarris Sommers had better things to do the other night than steal religious artifacts.

But Sommers senior is a serious suspect for the original crime. Just. He has motive, possible means and a narrow window of opportunity, assuming he faked taking his medicine and sneaked out while his daughter was downstairs with Lankril. But could he also have killed Merch and sabotaged Ferlane’s suit? Did anybody see him near the suit lockers at any time? All

I’ve really got against him is that he knows computers, but is he really skilled enough?

For that matter, Warwick Verson has a very strong motive and was in the construction business. Why not hypothesize that he brought some revolutionary miniature phase shifting commercial debonder with him that miraculously penetrated the MaxSec case’s field without triggering it? His wife would give him an alibi. And then who knows what skills Deek and

Brandon have picked up? Could Klemp be playing a very clever game of double bluff? Has Wilver got any mysterious alien powers we don't know about?

Enough! Too much fantasizing and not enough proof.

And if any of them somehow got hold of the Imnulate, what did they do with the expletive deleted thing?

Rester, the security man, confirmed in slightly more technical language what Costermann told us about the MaxSec case's functions. What it boils down to is that there's no way he can see the case allowing any item to which it's sensitized to be removed. I described the readings on its displays and he agreed that according to them, despite indisputable evidence to the contrary, the Imnulate was still inside. He'd rung off looking distinctly unhappy. He was in good company.

I think I've about reached the limit with this.

I've tried to play the amateur detective as well as I could but I've failed. No silver star for Summerfield. We'll be in Thule tomorrow where the professionals, finally, can take over. Let them solve it. After all it's their job. Still, it would have been nice to have worked it out ourselves, for Ferlane's sake if nothing else.

*Extract ends*

Bernice stared out of her compartment window, feeling as bleak as the darkening countryside.

The land was patterned with mottled red and yellow lichens and shaggy beds of moss. There were no more major settlements this far north, as the most valuable of Tempest's fungi preferred warmer conditions. Nothing between them and Thule now but the monorail track. An intense flurry of sleet and snow billowed past, enveloping the train and reducing visibility to a few metres. When it cleared she saw it had gathered in the shelter of loose rocks, picking out the courses of the mountainside opposite. Its highest slopes, just before it vanished into the clouds, were already snow-capped.

Miserably, she watched the snow turn to slush outside as a slightly warmer blast of wind scoured the land.

The *Express* turned a long bend into a narrower more sheltered valley. Here a few stands of taller trees appeared flanking the line. Tight conical forms with very broad bases to anchor them against the wind. Some of them were actually tall enough to be silhouetted against the leaden sky.

Without warning a deep throb of power ran through the train as the force brakes cut in. Couplings squealed and clashed. A book and a few other loose items flew off her bedside table. Bernice felt her chair shifting and grabbed futilely for some support as momentum inexorably toppled her over on to the floor.

## ULTIMATUM

Rosen was surprised to find a small package waiting for him when he came off his next shift. According to the postmark it had travelled on the automatic high G-mail run from Juno, the major planetoid of the asteroid belt. The sender's address meant nothing to him. The timecode was just a few hours after he had communicated with Smith. Was that where Smith had been? The time delay would have been about right. But if his suspicions were correct about what Smith was after, why wasn't he on Tempest itself? Perhaps he was now. Presumably he could have arranged to have the package sent remotely. It didn't matter.

The package was soft and light and flexed slightly; just the right size and weight. It had to be his money and IOUs!

He'd been expecting somebody to bring his payment in person, and he had already given some thought as to where he could meet them. Somewhere discreet but public, so they couldn't try any double-cross or strong-arm tactics. And he would warn them about the supposed safeguards he had taken to expose Smith's plan should anything happen to him. Smith had agreed to his demands very easily and he wasn't about to be taken for a fool. But now he realized there was no need for anybody to come to the station. It was probably simpler and safer for Smith this way as well.

But eager as he was, he did not open the package immediately.

Even though it had gone through the usual station scanners, he still wasn't taking any chances. Carrying it carefully, he made his way to the engineering shop.



The *Polar Express* was still shuddering to a halt when Bernice scrambled to her feet. She tore open her door and plunged out into the corridor.

‘Professor, what is wrong?’ she heard Wilver call plaintively from behind her as he opened his own door.

She didn’t reply, saving her breath for sprinting forward through the dining and service cars. Her senses were tingling. One emergency stop per trip was reasonable, two was unfortunate, three spelt trouble, she thought as she ran. She clattered along the engine compartment walkway, flanked on either side by gleaming impellers and drive stacks, and finally burst through the door into the cab.

The streamlined prow of the *Express* was almost brushing the branches of a pseudo-pine tree that lay at an angle across the elevated line.

Murcell looked round at her and managed a sticky grin. ‘That was a close one, Professor. Sorry if it shook you up but I didn’t have much warning.’

Out of the side windows she saw the track ran only a couple of metres above the gently sloping ground here, passing through a wide-felled swathe in a small forest of pines.

Wrong, wrong! her inner voice shouted.

‘How did that tree get there?’ she said sharply. ‘It can’t have fallen naturally, and if it was blown this far, why are the rest still standing? It’s a trap! Reverse! Get us out of here!’

There must have been something compelling in her tone because Murcell didn’t argue. He punched buttons and twisted a control lever. The engine hummed as the train lifted slightly and slowly began to pull back from the barrier.

An alarm rang and lights flashed across the console. Murcell cursed as the train jerked to a halt for a second time.

‘What is it?’ Bernice demanded.

‘Rear proximity alarm.’ He hit a button below a screen which lit up to show the view from the rear car back the way they’d come.

Another tree lay across the track. This time Bernice saw the cable that had just dragged it into place snaking away into the tree’s downslope.

Bassit entered the cab. ‘What’s happening?’

‘We’re being hijacked,’ said Bernice bluntly. ‘Call Thule and warn them.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t, Professor. We’ve been cut off. No signals are getting in or out...’ Realization dawned. ‘Uh...I suppose the trackside receptors must be masked.’

Bernice looked at the tree ahead. ‘This is a big enough train. Can’t we push our way through?’

‘The nose might take the pressure,’ Murcell conceded, ‘but if a branch or something sizeable got between the underside and the track it could tear out a whole bank of lifting projectors or flip a carriage. We can’t risk it.’

‘Then we’re trapped,’ said Bassit starkly.

‘Who’s that?’ said Murcell, pointing out of the side window.

Three environment-suited figures had emerged from the shadows under the trees. The smaller figure in the lead was empty-handed, but the two flanking him each carried long thick-barrelled weapons. Something mean and powerful no doubt, Bernice thought. The smaller figure halted the group, then pointed and waved to the train, at the same time tapping the side of his helmet.

‘I think he wants to have a chat,’ said Bernice. ‘You’d better try the link again.’

‘But why are they doing this?’ asked Bassit, white-faced. ‘What do they want?’

‘Oh, I can guess what they want,’ Bernice said grimly. ‘The problem is, will they believe we can’t give it to them?’

They crossed back from the engine to Service 1. Yorland appeared looking grim-faced and followed them into Bassit’s office.

The 'Sound Only Selected' sign showed on Bassit's link when he switched it on. Bernice punched in the same option, just in case their caller had a visual receptor in his helmet.

'Yes?' she said tersely.

'Ah, Professor Summerfield, is it not?' came a clear level voice over the atmospheric crackle.

'And who do I have the pleasure of addressing?'

'You may call me Smith.'

'Well, Smith, what do you want?'

'Don't feign ignorance. Professor, it does not become you. I want the Drell Imnulate, as I'm sure you have guessed.'

'That might be a slight problem. It's been stolen.'

'So I understand. But I also know your investigations, together with those of the regular police force, have demonstrated that in all probability it is still on board.'

'But we've searched the whole train and it's not here.'

'Can you not admit the possibility that it has simply been hidden where you cannot find it?'

'What if it has?'

'I can bring a certain incentive to bear on whoever has stolen the Imnulate that is beyond the scope of your powers. Look outside...'

More men emerged from the wood. Bernice counted eight of them, and presumably there were more on the other side of the train. Six were armed with shoulder-hung automatic weapons, while a couple carried a heavy semi-portable high energy blaster and a thick-barrelled projectile launcher.

'It's a show of force,' said Yorland. 'He's trying to intimidate us.'

'And he's doing a bloody good job,' Bernice muttered softly. She turned back to the phone and said, 'All right, Smith. We can see your playmates have pretty toys. What's the deal?'

'It's quite simple.' Smith consulted his watch very deliberately. 'You have one hour to find the Imnulate and hand it over to me. If you do not, I will tear this train and its passengers apart piece by piece!'

'You mean you're holding the whole train hostage for its return?'

'Exactly.'

'You wouldn't!' Bassit gasped in horror. 'There are families on board... women and children!'

'I trust this can be resolved peacefully, Mr Bassit, which is why I have generously allowed you time to consider your situation, and for the thief to conclude that there is only one option open. This particular location on your route was carefully chosen to ensure we shall not be disturbed for several hours at least, even assuming the authorities realize what is happening and dispatch a relief party immediately. Meanwhile, as you see, I have ample resources to enforce my demands if it becomes necessary. If you doubt my resolve to initiate such extreme measures, remember what happened to your sister train.'

Bassit looked aghast. 'You were responsible for the crash of the *Equatorial*?'

'Yes. Planting a bomb on board was an insurance I had taken out before I knew your trip was going to be so eventful, in case I needed a diversion or a demonstration of power. In the end it also served to prevent your rendezvous with the police team from Thule, whose presence would have made this task much harder. But that is all academic now. You know what I want and you have' - he consulted his watch again - 'fifty-nine minutes left to produce the Imnulate.'

And he rang off.

Even as they were staring at each other in dismay, they heard Smith's amplified voice booming through the outside air.

'Passengers of the *Polar Express*, your attention, please. My name is Smith. As I have just informed your police deputies, if you wish to continue your journey to Thule in safety and avoid any bloodshed, you will hand over the Drell Imnulate within one hour. You can see my men are heavily armed. Do not make it necessary for me to use them to take the Imnulate by force.

'Passengers of the *Polar Express*...'

The words faded as he moved away down the side of the train.

Yorland said, 'A hijacking in this day and age! It's incredible!'

'Which is probably why this Smith character thought of it,' Bernice said. 'You treat trains on Tempest like little isolated worlds that nobody and nothing enters or leaves except at the proper stops. But this trip's shown that's not so.'

Bassit said slowly, 'But we are really isolated now. No emergency tender could reach us for at least five hours. He's planned this very well.'

Bernice frowned. 'Yes, he has, hasn't he. In fact he seems unusually well informed about our circumstances.'

Yorland looked at her curiously. Bassit continued, 'I do not like the thought of giving into threats, but I don't see we have any choice. Whoever stole the Imnulate will have to hand it over now.'

Bernice shook her head. 'No. That's where this Smith's logic breaks down. Fear cuts both ways. Remember that whoever's responsible is also a double murderer. If they own up they know what's going to happen to them even if we get out of this fix. They might simply be too scared, or prefer to risk keeping quiet.'

'Can we arrange some way the thing can be returned anonymously?' Yorland wondered.

'How? I don't think we've got the time or the right physical setting to allow it to be done.'

Bassit was looking at her in deepening dismay. 'Do you really believe the thief will keep quiet?'

'I hope I'm wrong. And since we've got nothing to lose you'd better make the request anyway. Offer the thief every consideration. It might just work.'

Bassit nodded, composed himself for a moment, then opened the public address channel.

'Your attention, please. The line has been blocked both in front and behind the train. You have heard the demands being made. If the Imnulate is still on board, I urge whoever has it to bring it at once to my office in the forward service

car, or to contact any of the train staff. I promise this gesture will be brought to the attention of the authorities when we reach Thule, where it will certainly count in your favour. Meanwhile will all passengers please try to remain calm. That is all.'

Bassit closed the channel. He looked very tired, Bernice thought.

Yorland said, 'Is there a chance this Smith is bluffing about using force?'

'I don't think so from the sound of him,' Bernice said. 'An intelligent hard case, probably with a touch of the Napoleon complex from the look of him. Dangerous. The only thing probably holding him back is fear of accidentally damaging the Immulate in an all-out attack. It's our only advantage. Meanwhile we'd better prepare for the worst.'

'You mean to fight?' said Bassit.

'I'm open to any better suggestions if you have any.'

'Suppose we let Smith on board to see the Immulate's not here for himself?'

'It took us six hours or so to check the whole train, and this Smith thinks we still missed it,' said Yorland. 'He hasn't really got time to search, he's banking on fear to do his job for him. If he's telling the truth when he says he bombed the *Equatorial* just as a diversion, he's capable of anything. Supposing he starts threatening to execute people one by one until the Immulate is produced? We daren't let him get on board. No, the Professor's right. We'd better prepare to fight.'

Bassit's lapel communicator beeped and Pell's voice spoke out: 'I have called my assistants in and we are preparing the sickbay... just in case.'

'Thank you, Doctor,' said Bassit. 'We shall keep you informed of developments.'

There was a knock on the door. It was Costermann, Wilver and Lankril.

'We want to get our guns from the lockers,' Lankril said simply. Costermann nodded, apparently still too dazed by the latest turn of events to speak. It took something like this to

make them stand shoulder to shoulder in agreement, Bernice thought wryly. She glanced at Bassit.

‘As you wish,’ he said.

‘OK, but don’t start anything prematurely,’ she warned them, as Bassit called one of his assistants to open the gun locker. ‘Do you want a gun as well, Mr Wilver?’

‘I do not think such a thing becomes me,’ he said, hefting his umbrella. ‘But be assured that when the time comes I will use this to a most positive effect. What are your plans? Is there any way I can aid them?’

‘We’ll let you know. Right now, please go back to A car and try to keep everybody calm.’

Wilver nodded and scuttled away.

Rosen returned to his compartment with the instruments he’d surreptitiously borrowed from engineering. He placed his precious package, still unopened, in the middle of his lounge table and carefully ran the chemical and electromagnetic scanners over it. According to them the parcel contained no volatiles associated with any known explosive chemicals, nor metallic parts or energy cells.

Smith must have decided he was getting enough for himself to afford the extra expense, Rosen decided. With trembling hands he tore open the package.

Inside were the bundle of his IOUs and an open credit transfer card, payable to bearer, for twenty-four thousand shillings.

He leafed through the IOUs intently, but they were all there.

He’d done it! At last his luck had changed.

Then his elation was punctured by a stray thought. What about the *Express* and its valuable cargo, if that really was the object of all Smith’s efforts? What had he got planned for them?

\* \* \*

The corridors of the *Express* were full of people carrying environment suits and guns. Mattresses were being removed from the lower berths and carried to the upper decks. In the

Economy and Tourist cars children's voices were raised in mingled alarm and excitement. Bernice hurried towards Service 2, her expression set and determined.

It was surprising how well the passengers and crew were coping, she thought. Perhaps the events of the last few days had also prepared them for this crisis in some odd way. She hoped they would keep their nerve. She had no doubt that Smith would go to any lengths to obtain the Immulate, and that potentially every life on board was at risk. Maybe the thief would miraculously return it at the last moment, but she wasn't hopeful. And if they were to escape from his trap, there was one possible obstacle that had to be eliminated first. Her suspicions might be unfounded but she couldn't take the chance that she was wrong. And there was only one way to find out for sure.

She unlocked and flung open the door of Tyne's makeshift cell, strode inside and closed it behind her. Tyne sprang up from his bed.

'I thought you'd forgotten about me!' he said anxiously. 'This Smith character... is he for real?'

'Unfortunately yes. Which is why I've got a job for you,' Bernice replied crisply. 'As an incentive, let me point out that it might help save the lives of everybody on the train, your own included. Interested?'

Tyne gulped then took a deep breath. 'I'm listening.'

She told him rapidly and concisely what had to be done.

'Get help from Pell or Yorland while they can spare it,' she concluded, 'but don't tell any of the passengers what you're doing. Not one. understand? Now here's a spare set of steward's keys if you need to open anything. You've got forty-five minutes.'

'That's not enough time,' Tyne protested, but Bernice was already out of the door, which she left open. Tyne sighed heavily and strode out after her.

\* \* \*

Bernice found Yorland in the Service 1 suit locker room, which was now almost empty. He was already dressed in his environment suit. She started getting into hers.



‘All the reserve weapons are distributed,’ he said. ‘I thought we’d post everybody who’s armed in the coupler modules. That’s where they’ll have to come in. As we’re stationary I’ve been able to disable the safeties so that the outer doors can be opened manually just wide enough to give them some cover while they shoot. I think we’ve got a good chance. Say what you like about our trains, we build them solidly.’

‘I hope so. How many guns do we have in all?’

‘About sixty, including the reserve. All pistols except for the pieces Klemp’s men had with them. They’re probably illegal but right this minute I’m not complaining. We’ll give this Smith a tight if he starts anything. Shock tactics and big threats can misfire. We don’t put up with that sort of thing on Tempest. I don’t think he’s a native or he’d know better how we’d react!’

‘If he didn’t I’m sure he will by now,’ said Bernice.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Never mind, it’s being taken care of.’ She looked at her watch, seeing the minutes tick inexorably away. ‘But will it be in time?’

Rosen knew what he should do, but he also knew he didn’t have the courage.

He couldn’t let Smith get away with it.

A wild instinct to play an advantage had won him a bonus, but now the payment mocked him. Was this blood money? If it was simply stealing from a man who had too much anyway perhaps he could let it go. But the more he thought about it the more he was sure Smith was involved in the business on the *Express*.

A whole trainful of people!

It might get messy. People might get hurt... or worse.

But he couldn’t do anything to call attention to the device now. If Smith were caught he would implicate him, and even if he’d removed it by then there might still be enough suspicion to ruin him. And what if Smith escaped and wanted revenge? He remembered his barely disguised threat

back down in Thule. Did he want to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder?

Wait. Perhaps he could warn the authorities anonymously?

Yes. He could rig the monitors so that the call could never be traced to him. That would salve his conscience. Whatever happened at least he would have made an effort.

He reached out towards his console - and found his right arm was dead.

He couldn't lift it or even close his fingers. And his left was just as useless. Alarmed he tried to get out of the chair but his legs refused to function. He could not even bend forward. An insidious progressive numbness was seeping through his whole body.

Terrified, he tried to call for help, but all that emerged from his lips was a faint gasp.

Then the numbness reached his chest.

There was a brief moment of pain and then nothing.

## THE BATTLE OF THE TRAIN

Lyn Masco met Tyne as he was hurrying along the corridor of Tourist Car A with a distracted scowl of concentration on his face. They hardly recognized each other as they were both now dressed in shapeless company-issue environment suits with their helmets open. Their reunion was ignored by the anxious passengers pressing past them. However, Tyne did not address her by the name on her ticket.

‘Lil!’ he said delightedly. ‘Are you OK?’

‘I’m fine,’ Lil assured him, ‘but I’ve been worried sick after they took you away. Then there was that mob... I tried to stop them.’

‘Did you? Thanks, Lil. I’ve been locked up for days. I couldn’t get word to you.’ His face set. ‘I didn’t tell them you were in on the scheme.’

‘I know. That was straight of you. But what’s happening now? Have you broken out?’

‘No, I’ve got a special job to do. Might help to keep me the right side of the bars. Sorry, no time to explain.’

‘Need any help?’

Tyne smiled. ‘Thanks but no. You stay clean and clear of me. And keep your head down. All hell’s about to break loose. This Smith character sounds like a bad loser.’

‘Don’t I know the type!’ She hesitated, then said uncharacteristically softly, ‘Take care of yourself.’

‘You too, Lil. Uh... when this is over... we’ve got to have a talk about things.’

She smiled. ‘OK,’ she said simply.

His eyes lingered on her as she walked away, then with an effort he turned his thoughts back to his appointed task.

Smith's deadline had hardly five minutes left to run when, at Bernice's request, all the First Class passengers gathered in the observation lounge. Though the light had not quite left the sky, all the window blinds were firmly drawn to prevent the hostile forces observing them.

It was a strange contrast to the last time they were there, Bernice thought. Gone were the expensive clothes and the inconsequential chatter over drinks. Now they were all dressed in anonymous environment suits with only their faces showing through open visors to distinguish them. The only exception was Wilver, who, though clad in his own specially tailored environment suit, still clutched his umbrella and bowler. She saw a range of emotions displayed, not just fear but resolution and confusion. The Versons were holding hands and looking stoic. Klemp's female companions huddled against him like frightened birds. Costermann looked grim but determined. Lucas Sommers, face as impassive as ever, had an arm around Clarris, who was snatching frightened glances at Denn Lankril. The Astalls were holding Tallia close to them. The young girl was looking about her as though uncertain whether to be excited or afraid. Deek and Brandon just looked ready to fight, holding their guns close to their chests.

'We haven't much time, so please listen carefully,' Bernice said. 'Smith will probably try to take the forward cars first since it's here the Imnulate went missing and so as good a place to start as anywhere.' There was a worried murmur and she raised her hands for silence. 'But he's unlikely to use his heaviest weapons for fear of damaging it, at least to start with. For the moment you'll all stay in here. When the shooting starts keep flat on the floor.'

'Can't we buy the man off?' said one of the B Car passengers with a desperate edge to his words. 'If all he's doing it for is money. We can afford it.'

'I don't think he'd accept cheques, and he's not in this for trinkets and small change. There's only one thing he wants,' Kite glanced at her watch, 'and I'm afraid we

There was a rush of footsteps on the stairs, causing every head in the room to turn. Tyne appeared. In one hand he clutched his rugged orange inflatable drop bag, while in the other, held triumphantly aloft, was the glittering blue translucent form of the Imnulate.

'I got it!' he shouted, waving the Imnulate about as though he was parading a trophy. Bernice felt the tension in the room lift almost magically, and saw the sea of tense faces dissolve into foolish smiles of surprise, heartfelt relief and even a rictus of outright astonishment.

'Your long shot paid off. Prof,' Tyne complimented Bernice as he finished his victory dance and pushed the Imnulate into his protective bag.

'What long shot?' Bassit asked.

Bernice smiled broadly. 'Set a thief to catch a thief. Or in this case a thief's stash. Where did you find it?'

Tyne glanced up from inflating the bag around the Imnulate, his face split in a self-satisfied grin. 'The last place you'd look, of course, as whoever took it must have worked out. In Costermann's room hidden inside the back of a lounge chair. I reckon your thief knew just what the procedure would be, and that nobody would search Costermann's rooms properly before they were sealed off. So they weren't checked when the train was searched. Probably has a contact in the police or forensic investigation department all set to slip it out when they made their examination.' He finished inflating the protective bag and tossed it to Bernice. 'There, now I don't want to see the thing again. It's bad luck. Throw it outside for that Smith character to play with and let's get going.'

There was a chorus of approval at his words. A couple of passengers crowded round him to shake hands and clap him on the back. Then Warwick and Ellyn Verson stepped forward.

'You must not hand Drell's Imnulate to those people outside,' Warwick said firmly.

This intervention drew angry murmurs from the others.

'I believe they are agents for the Kedd-Drell,' Ellyn added, which raised a fresh mutter of puzzlement.

Bernice looked at them intently. 'Believe me,' she said, tapping the beachball-sized sphere in her hands, 'this thing is not worth people dying over.'

'Most assuredly correct,' said Wilver loudly.

'It represents something more important than life,' Warwick Verson countered.

'Religious idolatry,' Lucas Sommers sneered.

'It can be a power for great good or great evil,' Ellyn Verson said stoutly.

'What would you suggest we do with it?' Bernice asked her.

'Keep it safe. Hide it again. Don't tell Smith it's here. We must try and get it to Thule.'

'Would you ask these other people to risk their lives for your beliefs?' Bernice asked. 'Wasn't your Drell a man of peace? Would he want blood shed over his statue?'

The Versons were silent.

Bernice continued. 'But if there was no other choice, would you smash it to prevent it falling into the wrong hands?'

The Versons looked appealingly at each other, then Warwick nodded solemnly. 'Yes, I would.'

'No!' Denn Lankril said, supported by several other voices, 'We don't know how Smith would react if you did that. It's just a hunk of crystal.' He glanced at Nathan Costermann. 'Just' property... it's not worth anybody dying over.'

'Yes: hand it over!' somebody called out from the back.

'Just a minute,' said Bernice firmly. 'We can't simply hand it over and hope Smith keeps his word. We'll show him we've got it, then bargain to get the block ahead of us cleared *before* we hand it over.'

Some of the group nodded while others shook their heads.

'I believe we should not prevaricate,' said Wilver. 'We have a shortage of time. I will volunteer to carry the article out to this Smith, but threaten to smash it unless the line is cleared. I will wait there in the open until the train is ready to move, and only then set it down and return. That will show Smith we are serious.'

‘Are you sure, Mr Wilver?’ Bassit asked anxiously. ‘How do you know you can trust him?’

‘I am willing to take the risk,’ Wilver said unperturbed. ‘There is no other way to expedite our departure and ensure a proper end to this affair. Please give me the Imnulate, Professor.’

Hesitantly, Bernice handed the inflated bag over to Wilver, who wrapped a couple of fabric-clad tentacles securely about it, still clasping his bowler and umbrella in the others.

‘No, I can’t let you take the risk,’ Bernice said suddenly, and tried to pull the bag back. ‘I’ll do it.’

‘No, Professor Summerfield,’ Wilver said, still holding on firmly, ‘there is no need to risk yourself.’

‘I insist,’ Bernice said, tugging harder.

Wilver jerked his umbrella upward. There was a flash and crack from its tip. Tallia Astall screamed. A section of the ceiling exploded into sparks and a billow of smoke carried the smell of burnt plastic over their heads. Everybody flinched back in surprise. Bernice abruptly released her hold on the bag and stepped back, even as Brandon and Deek swung their guns round to cover Wilver.

‘No!’ she said commandingly. ‘It’s not worth it. We can’t risk a fight in here. Innocent people will get hurt. Mr Bassit, tell them to let Wilver out through the doors downstairs.’

Bassit spoke urgently into his collar communicator.

‘That is most sensible,’ said Wilver, swinging his umbrella gun about him menacingly as he edged towards the door. ‘Do not interfere and you will not be harmed. You know I do not like my plans perturbed.’

Warwick Verson suddenly lunged forward, hands clawing for the Imnulate’s cocoon. Wilver’s umbrella cracked and he fell to the floor, clasping a smoking hole in the thigh of his suit and groaning in pain.

‘Next time I shall not be so forbearing,’ Wilver warned. He backed out of the room and down the stairs. As he disappeared Ellyn Verson knelt by her wounded husband as Bassit called for Pell to attend. The other passengers began to babble in consternation.

‘Quiet!’ Bernice snapped out.

‘You going to let the little *crek* get away with it?’ Klemp growled at her in apparent disgust.

‘Yes,’ she said simply, pushing her way over to the window and pulling aside a corner of the blind. She saw the emergency ladder unfold from the coupler module below them and touch the ground. The door slid open and Wilver appeared and descended the steps with his precious burden. As soon as he was down he scuttled away up the slope mottled with patches of melting snow towards the trees and the waiting line of Smith’s men.

Bernice let the blind drop back and turned to face the others.

‘He bought it,’ she said with relief. ‘Well done, Tyne. Now we can work on getting out of here.’

There was a look of utter bewilderment on almost every face in the room.

‘It was a fake, wasn’t it?’ said Costermann in a flat voice, breaking the silence.

‘That’s right,’ Bernice confirmed. ‘We couldn’t move until we’d flushed Smith’s agent out into the open and got rid of him.’ She glanced down at the Versons. ‘Sorry, but it could have been any one of you and I had to be sure.’

Klemp suddenly roared with laughter, and Bernice raised her hands to stem the fresh babble of questions.

‘No time to explain more now! We’ve only bought ourselves a few more minutes, then Smith will resort to Plan B. Meanwhile we need we need to blast that tree ahead of us. Costermann, you used to be a chemist, right?’

He blinked. ‘Yes. What of it?’

‘Can you whip up a home-made bomb? Never knew a chemist who hadn’t played with making little bangs just for fun when he was younger. Use anything you need from the cargo or medical supplies.’

Costermann gathered himself. ‘I’ll do my best, Professor.’

‘Right, get moving. Bassit will help you.’ Costermann and Bassit left. Pell appeared and started tending to Warwick Verson’s leg.



‘But you can’t just walk out there and place a bomb under that tree,’ Denn Lankril said. ‘They’d shoot you down before you went five steps.’

‘That possibility had occurred to me,’ said Bernice dryly, turning to Yorland. ‘Have you got any more of those poles you used to stabilize the landslide?’

‘Yes, a few.’

‘Then rig up a length about six, seven metres long, with a h(x)k on the end. I’ll also need an electric firing circuit with about fifteen metres of flex.’

‘That should be easy enough.’

‘Then go to it.’ She turned to the others. ‘I don’t know whether you’ll be safer in a group or spread out along the upper compartments: pros and cons either way. But as Wilver thinks you’ll all be in here, we’ll leave this room empty just in case. Wherever you go, keep low, use the furniture for cover and don’t show any lights. Be ready to move quickly if you have to - and to fight if you must. Now get out of here. Things are going to get very busy in a minute.’

The squat form of the *Kingfisher* rested in a blackened clearing in the trees.

Its otherwise sleek grey skin was pockmarked with recessed thruster nozzle clusters, while from its tail protruded oversized drive tubes. It had small viewports covered by sliding shutters, retractable stubby wings and sturdily braced landing legs.

Escorted by two of Smith’s mercenaries, Wilver climbed its extended ramp and passed through the airlock. Smith was waiting for him on the other side.

‘That was close, Lorrix,’ he commented. ‘I was almost ready to move in when the Imnulate turned up.’

Wilver flicked a couple of tentacles airily. ‘An annoyance. I had to extemporize. It was well you held back. But the operation has concluded successfully, and there are even compensations.’

‘Such as?’

'You will not need to employ crude force to release the Imnulate from its container. The unknown thief has done it for us.'

He rested Tyne's bag on the deck and opened the valve. The bag deflated. He reached into the folds and proudly withdrew the Imnulate.

Wilver's mobile eyes swivelled wildly.

Smith gaped, momentarily speechless.

The thing in Wilver's hands was an amalgam of shredded surgical gloves and pieces of clear plastic sheeting, roughly taped and glued together, which had then been varnished with window repair sealant to make a rigid shell and finally filled with blue tinted water to give it weight and substance.

Wilver found speech at last.

'I do not understand... it looked real...' His eyes rolled again. 'Of course, the man Tyne never kept still long enough to allow close inspection. Deception! I... we, all saw what we wanted to see!'

Smith took the facsimile from Wilver's trembling grasp and held the crude shape in his hands for a moment, as though examining it intently. Then his features contorted into a savage snarl and he hurled it against the bulkhead, where it burst in a shower of water and shreds of plastic. He took a deep breath, straightened his collar, and was his normal self again.

He raised his wrist comm to his lips. 'Smith calling *Polar Express*.'

Bernice answered almost immediately. 'Hello Smith. I thought you might be calling.'

'That was clever. Professor. I assume you were responsible?'

'Guilty, but unrepentant.'

'You are testing my patience. My deadline expired almost ten minutes ago. Hand over the real Imnulate immediately.'

'Believe me. Smith, we would if we could. Ask your friend Wilver if you didn't hear it all for yourself. That debate in the lounge was genuine. The majority view is that if we had the

Imnulate we'd give it to you. But we haven't and that's the simple truth.'

'Then you have been deceived. It is still on board.'

'Can't you admit the possibility that you might be wrong? Wishful thinking doesn't change the facts. Somebody smuggled the Imnulate off the train. I don't know how, but they did. We'd let you on board to look for yourself, but proving the negative case will take more time than you can spare. Besides which the general consensus is that we can't trust you. Perhaps you project the wrong image? Have you ever thought of calling in a public relations consultant?'

'I'm not a man to be insulted lightly. Professor -'

'Then I'll insult you heavily: don't be a bloody self-delusional fool! Ask Wilver how thoroughly we searched the train, including Costermann's compartment, by the way. Then ask him how many guns he saw on board. We're not exactly defenceless, and if you start anything, remember we've got nothing to lose. Be smart. Go back to where you came from.'

Wilver was looking thoughtful. 'It is possible she is telling the truth, Smith.'

'No!' Smith said sharply, 'I will not believe it until I have seen it is so with my own eyes.' He changed comm channels. 'Smith to Team One: open up that train!'

The *Express* was a dark mass lying inert along the track. No light showed from within. The early winter night had fallen, and the only illumination in the wooded valley came from the grey clouds rolling overhead. An electrical storm played about some distant peak beyond the valley walls, and added only an occasional diffuse flicker to the setting. A gusty cold wind stirred the heavy boughs of the trees. In the black shadows under them figures moved purposefully, their senses boosted by night-sight goggles.

Then a signal was given, unseen and unheard by those on the train.

Small-arms fire raked the length of the *Express*, making everybody dive for cover. Windows starred and cracked. An

armour-piercing missile flashed out of the darkness and struck the rearmost service car, punching a hole in the side and exploding within. The shock jolted the whole train. Atmospheric integrity alarms began to sound. In reply a fusillade of shots stabbed out into the woods from the coupler module doors. Grenades were lobbed out of the darkness to bounce and burst on the ground, sending out billows of thick smoke that swirled about the *Express* as it was whipped up by the wind. In seconds the defenders were blinded.

In Yorland's monitor room Bernice scanned the bank of small screens displaying pictures from the external cameras, normally used to check the hatches while it was loading and unloading in a station. As the smoke screen closed over them she rapidly adjusted the camera contrast. Faintly she made out dark forms in bulky suits swarming up from under the train.

Why hadn't she seen them come out of the woods? Of course, they must have come along the line underneath the track! She'd underestimated the opposition. Smith was too smart to try a frontal assault. She saw arms reaching upward and heard dull clunks against the outer doors of the coupler modules. She hit a speaker button: 'Defenders: get clear of the outer doors - they're mining them!'

On the monitors she saw the defenders scrambling back into the carriages and shutting the inner doors. A screen lit up with a dazzling flash, and a shiver ran through the frame of the train, then another and another as blasts went off in the first five coupler modules, blowing out the external door locks.

As expected, they were concentrating all their efforts on the front of the train.

There was a blast close by. That was the engine coupler module! There came the crack of gunfire and the sound of a scream cut short. They mustn't lose control of the engine itself!

Time to play the all-action hero again, she thought grimly to herself. She snapped down her suit visor, drew her gun and opened the door.

The corridor was red-lit, with only minimal nightlights operating. One of the defenders was crouching by the half open door at the end of the car. There was a crumpled body lying beside him. Even as Bernice took this in the man rose and fired a couple of snap shots through the gap in the door. A heavier blast lashed back at him from the coupler module compartment, striking him in the chest. As he reeled backwards Bernice sprinted forward. The door started to slide open and she snapped off a discouraging shot. The muzzle of a gun appeared round the edge of the frame. She dived flat as a blast bolt blazed over her head, skidded through the doorway on her stomach, twisted like an eel and fired upwards, hitting the chest of the figure in the black combat suit. He staggered backwards under the impact but did not fall, the blast absorbed by his body armour. Her next shot went straight through his faceplate. His legs buckled and he slid limply down the wall.

As Bernice scrambled upright a hand reached over the sill of the module's twisted and half open outer door. She lunged forward, thrust out her gun and fired point blank at the helmeted head below. The hand vanished followed an instant later by a heavy thump. She snatched up the gun the first intruder had dropped, fumbled to find the action control, set it to continuous, reached blindly over the door sill and sprayed the ground below the train with fire until the charge died.

Blaster bolts exploded around the door frame and she dived backwards into the corridor, cradling her own pistol to her chest. She saw a figure in a TGR suit bob into sight beyond the shattered window panel of the engine compartment door opposite and fire an automatic weapon out through it and the module's outer door into the darkness.

'Where were you?' she called out.

‘Sorry... one of them got in here... had to stop him before he reached the cab,’ came the reply, which Bernice recognized belonged to Cobb, the *Express*’s second driver.

‘Is he dead?’

‘I think so... I’ve never done this sort of thing before.’

‘Well, you’ll get plenty of practice tonight.’

In a utility room in Service 2, Bassit watched Costermann mixing carefully measured portions from various cartons and flasks that had formerly contained cleaning chemicals. The sounds of fighting got louder but Costermann did not even flinch. Bassit thought he’d never seen anybody so determined.

Then came a burst of fire in the corridor outside.

‘Keep working,’ Bassit told Costermann, as he reluctantly drew his pistol and stepped towards the door.

Deek reeled back into the corridor, dropping his gun and clutching the smoking hole in the arm of his suit. Brandon reached past him and shot the attacker three times at point-blank range as Deek slapped an emergency patch over the hole. Two more figures tumbled into the coupler module lock, firing into the corridor. Brandon shot one even as a bolt burnt through his leg, dropping him to the ground.

Deek hurled his massive bulk forward, smashing the remains of the door aside and crashed into the remaining raider. Before the man could recover, Deek had picked him up with his good arm and thrown him bodily out through the open outer door and back into the night from which he had come.

\* \* \*

Huddling between the protective walls of upturned chairs and mattresses, Clarris Sommers heard footsteps cross the roof of their compartment.

‘Father... there’s someone up there!’

Even as she spoke something slapped against the curving lounge rooflight.

‘Get down!’ her father commanded.

The circular section of rooflight blew inwards, cut cleanly through by a shaped ring charge. Clarris felt her suit tighten slightly as the pressure dropped and a blast of Tempest air rushed in.

Before they could recover themselves, two dark figures had dropped into the room. The beam of a rifle-mounted torch swung about until it came to rest on them, probing dazzlingly through their faceplates.

‘Where is it!’ an amplified voice demanded. ‘The Drell idol! Speak up or one of you gets hurt.’

‘We don’t know!’ Clarris shouted.

Her father lunged at the nearest of the raiders, only to be knocked aside with a contemptuous swing of his rifle butt.

‘Right, you’re volunteering,’ the booming voice said.

Clarris screamed.

Just then the stair door burst open.

In a crouching run Bernice headed back down the service car corridor. The body of one of the attackers lay half in the doorway of the kitchen. A meat cleaver was embedded in the side of his neck. Inside Jean-Louis stood defiantly holding a long knife.

‘Are you all right?’ Bernice asked.

‘Never attack a cook in his own kitchen,’ Jean-Louis replied simply.

The single raider who dropped into the lounge of Stateroom A found it deserted. The door to one of the bedrooms leading off it was closed, the other wide open. Even as he took this in, there came a scrape and soft bump from behind the closed door. He stepped towards it, levelling his gun at the lock.

As he did so a figure silently emerged from behind the open bedroom door and shot him three times rapidly and precisely.

‘Not in my backyard,’ Klemp said to the fallen figure. ‘OK, girls, you can come out now.’

Bernice made her way through the First Class cars to Service 2, diving through the coupling modules between bursts of fire and encouraging the defenders as she went. Including those in Service 1, she counted eight attackers' bodies and five of their own. How many were dead she did not stay to check.

Crossing the last module there was no incoming fire at all. Were they winning?

She found another black-clad body at the end of the corridor of Service 2. Yorland and Bassit were standing guard over the sickbay rooms. Through the cracked and patched faceplate of his helmet she saw Bassit had a temporary dressing over one side of his head. He looked very pale.

'Are you OK?' Bernice asked anxiously.

'Thank you... I have been better, Professor. I do not like guns, I'm afraid.'

Yorland said, 'I managed to get your rod and trigger finished before I got interrupted.'

'Good.'

She peered into the cramped surgery itself, its windows barricaded with tables. Pell and his assistants were working on three casualties, enveloped in emergency pressure tents. Tyne was inside nervously standing guard, trying not to look at the medical procedures taking place around him.

'Is Ferlane all right?'

'Yes, his room wasn't touched.'

'Stay here. There'll be more patients along soon, I'm afraid.'

Pell looked up from his work. 'Is the train safe?'

'I think the worst may be over - at least for the moment.'

She returned to the corridor. The sound of gunfire was definitely fading. Bassit was listening to voices coming over his intercom channel. 'They say Smith's men have pulled back to the woods...' They could hear ragged cheering echoing along the train.

Costermann appeared from a side room, carefully carrying a plastic carton of grey-brown powder which he presented to Bernice.

'This is your bomb. I'm not certain of its yield, but I promise it will go off with quite a bang.'



Bernice nodded. 'Right, now it's our turn. Before Smith decides to bring out his heavy guns!'

Smith stood on the *Kingfisher's* ramp, suited and braced against the wind that hissed through the trees, and looked down on the survivors of his assault force illuminated by the airlock lights.

'I thought I'd chosen the best team money could buy,' he said disdainfully. 'One capable of applying force with the minimum of collateral damage. Apparently I was wrong.'

'You never said they'd have so many beamers,' one of the mercenaries complained bitterly. 'And they knew how to use them. We lost over the odds. Good mates too.'

There was a mutter of agreement from his comrades.

'You should never have given them that hour to prepare,' somebody called out.

'When I wish for tactical advice I shall ask for it,' Smith said coldly. 'Meanwhile you will use the heavy weapons. Start with the engine and the last car. Don't hit anything else unless I tell you. I trust you can do that successfully?'

Just then a bright light filtered up through the trees from where the *Express* lay.

All the *Express's* external lights, except the big forward-facing lamps, had been turned full on: loading spots, stair courtesy strips and running lights. They lit the ground on both sides of the track all the way to the edge of the trees, only dimmed by occasional flurries of sparkling sleety rain. In fact there was only one part of the train that was not picked out by their brilliance.

Bernice slithered out of the hatch in the roof of the engine compartment and lay as flat as her suit permitted, grasping the recessed handrails that ran along the gently curving apex of the hull to brace herself against the wind. It had been her

idea, so she could hardly ask anybody else to go. At least her arm was not giving her any trouble, thanks to another shot of painkillers from Pell, and now that she was committed and under way the fear had gone. As long as the diversion of the lights worked. They had not used them before because the attackers would have simply shot them out. They might do that now, but it would take a minute or two. And two minutes was all she needed.

From below, Yorland handed up the composite rod with the battery at one end and the bomb suspended from a hook on the other. Running between two and looping about the rod was the flex of the firing circuit. Yorland gave her a thumbs-up and pulled the hatch to again. She would have liked company, but one person was less likely to be seen as two and her only protection lay in remaining unobserved.

She began to edge her way forward along the roof, drawing the improvised devices along with her. She had five metres to go before the nose of the engine began to curve down and away. Beyond that was the tree barricade. Before the lights were put on, Murcell had edged the train slowly forward until it was almost touching it once again. She hoped Smith would not notice the slight shift in their position.

Small-arms fire flashed from the shadows of the woods and she felt the shots explode against the side of the carriages. A light on the side of the train exploded in a shower of glittering fragments. Bolts of fire lashed back, exploding against tree trunks and sending glowing embers dancing away with the wind. A wild shot grazed the roof ten centimetres in front of Bernice's outstretched hand. She snatched it away instinctively, watching molten splashes of metal cool rapidly through cherry red and into blackness.

She edged on. Reach forward, pull, slither. Reach, pull, slither. Reach, pull -

Another light blew out, and another. Darkness was starting to creep back towards them.

Then she was over the nose of the train.

In the reflected glare of the train lights she could see a cable running tautly from the upper branches of the tree

down to the ground on the other side of the track from the main trunk. Murcell had been right: if they'd tried to push it aside it would have torn the train off the track. The branches spread widely so that she could almost have reached out and touched the tip of the nearest. But the bomb had to be placed precisely, in contact with the trunk itself.

With an effort of will she shut out all sensations of the battle, concentrating only on the task before her. Still lying perfectly flat she slid the rod forward, pushing the dangling bomb on its end quickly across the empty air until it was hidden by the foliage. Carefully she guided it on to a fork between two branches where they joined the main trunk. A twist of her wrist and the bomb was released from the hook. It remained in place. She withdrew the rod, letting the flex slide off it until it was free.

'Ready,' she said into her suit microphone.

The *Express* began to glide slowly backwards. As it did so she paid out the flex coiled about the battery pack. They couldn't risk setting off the bomb too close to the engine and driver's compartment. The fire from the woods redoubled. They knew something was up, but they hadn't spotted her yet. Just give us another thirty seconds, she thought fervently. Something exploded against a rear carriage, the flash briefly illuminating the whole valley. The roof kicked under her, jerking her head forward and down so the chin of her helmet banged sharply against the metal. They had deployed the heavy weapons. Smith was running out of patience. Lifting her head dizzily she continued unreeling the flex.

The *Express's* nose was eight metres back from the tree when bolts of fire began to cut the air over her head and burst about the edge of the roof, kicking up splashes of metal and plastic sheathing. Something struck her backpack and she felt a wash of heat along her side.

'Now, Professor!' Bassit's voice blared in her earphones.

She curled up in a ball and pressed the switch on the battery pack.

A sheet of red and yellow flame boiled up into the sky, for a moment defying the force of the wind, even as a booming roar almost deafened her. Flaming fragments of shattered trunk and twisted branches cartwheeled away into the night, some bouncing across the train roof and one striking her on the arm. Then everything vanished in a cloud of black smoke which shredded in the wind even as it billowed around the front of the train.

For a moment the valley was perfectly still as defender and attacker alike waited to see the result of the blast. Bernice uncurled and snatched a glance ahead.

Where the tree had been there was only a blackened scar on the track.

‘Go!’ she roared.

But the *Express* was already moving. For the first time its headlamps blazed into life.

And, starkly illuminated by the beams, Bernice saw three raiders standing on the track in front of them.

Even as she took them in, realizing they must have mounted the track while shielded from view by the tree barricade, one of them lifted the long thick lube of a missile launcher to his shoulder. As he did so the *Express*’s rarely used horn blared out its strident warning and the train surged forward under maximum power.

The sight and sound of the oncoming engine obviously unnerved the raiders. There was a flash from the muzzle of the launcher and Bernice ducked instinctively as an untargeted projectile flashed harmlessly overhead.

Then the *Express* was on them. She had a momentary glimpse of two figures leaping for their lives off the track. The missile launcher clanged against the prow of the engine and spun away into the darkness. A final hail of energy bolts followed after them from the ambush site. It was a futile gesture. Already they were pulling out of effective range as the spiky silhouettes of the valley trees began slipping past at increasing speed.

Bernice realized she was still clutching the battery pack. She tossed it over the side and clung weakly to the handrail. They'd done it! Smith would never catch them now.

'Are you all right, Professor?' Bassit's voice enquired anxiously.

'I'm fine. Keep going. I'm coming in.' She began to edge back towards the hatch, impelled by the growing force of the wind.

She was just two metres from it when a hand reached up over the side of the engine and clasped the handrail in front of her. Even as she gaped at it in astonishment, the third member of the missile launcher crew hauled himself on to the top of the engine.

Neither of them had time to draw their sidearms. With his free hand the raider drove his fist into her stomach even as Bernice kicked out savagely for his shins. They both gasped in pain, rolling from side to side across the roof with the swaying of the train, desperately clinging to the handrail. The raider reached across and smashed his clenched fist on to hers where it gripped the rail. She gasped in pain as her hold broke and she started to slide. In desperation she grabbed hold of her attacker about the waist. They rolled and he came to his knees, trying to tear her free, pounding ineffectually on her backpack. She gathered her legs under her and lifted, trying to pick him off his feet and throw him clear. Suddenly they were both on their feet, leaning at an absurd angle into the wind, each trying to gain leverage against the other. They twisted about and for a moment the raider had his back to the wind. Bernice fell backwards, doubled up one leg, planted a foot in his stomach and heaved. Propelled by the onrushing air he went flying over her head. He struck the roof behind her, bounced once wildly and then vanished over the side of the train into the darkness.

Bernice felt herself slithering after him, rearwards and sideways across the roof. She scrabbled for the handrail but missed her hold. Her head and shoulders slid over the edge.

Then something caught her ankle.

Yorland was leaning half out of the roof hatch, one hand grasping its coaming while the other held firmly on to her.

‘Don’t you know... passengers are not permitted to leave the train... while it’s in motion,’ he said, grunting with effort as he pulled her back.

A helpless fit of laughter overtook Bernice, and she was almost too weak to pull herself round and grasp Yorland’s arm. Feebly she scrabbled her way into the hatch with his help and found the steps below with her feet.

‘Thanks,’ she said.

‘Any time.’

The wind buffeted them. They must have been getting up towards a hundred kph. But Bernice braced herself against the side of the hatch and took one last look at the ambush valley.

She was just in time to see it lit up by a brilliant blue light.

‘What the hell’s that!’ said Yorland.

The light reflected off the lower clouds, throwing their billowing forms into strange relief. Then a bullet-like shape rose up from the valley, riding an intense spear of blue-white light.

‘Smith had a lander!’ Yorland said in amazement. ‘By God, he took a chance setting down here.’

‘Of course. We never thought how he got there or how he was going to get away afterwards,’ said Bernice. ‘We should have known he’d have something like that.’

‘He won’t make it twice. The air sheers and turbulence above the first layer’ll get him.’

But the craft was already cutting a smooth arc in the sky, brushing the clouds and then plunging down along the course of the monorail track. Bernice saw the bullet shape become a perfect circle of blackness, haloed by a nimbus of blue fire, growing larger by the second. It was coming at them head on!

She pulled the incredulous Yorland down the steps and slid the hatch shut over their heads.

‘You can’t fly on Tempest!’ Yorland protested, almost as though it was a mantra.

‘Apparently Smith thinks otherwise,’ Bernice snapped back as she unlatched the inner airlock door. ‘It’s not over yet. Is there a tunnel close by?’

‘The rest of the way to Thule’s all above ground.’

‘Then we’ve got to run for it as fast as we can.’

‘But we can’t. There may be structural damage...’ They piled through the door into the drive compartment. ‘She may not hold together if we go any faster.’

‘There’s no other choice,’ Bernice said. ‘If we don’t -’

Her words were drowned by a howling roar that was born of no natural wind. The train rocked dangerously as the shockwave struck it. Then the roar receded as fast as it had come.

Bernice pushed Yorland forward. ‘Tell Murcell to give it everything he’s got!’

‘It’ll be suicide!’

‘So will letting Smith get hold of us again. I think he’s through playing Mr Nice Guy!’ She started off back down the train.

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Talk to him. You never know...’

Smith’s voice was already issuing from Bassit’s office link as she entered.

‘...Summerfield? Please answer. Professor Summerfield...’

This time there was a face to go with the voice. It was distorted by Tempest’s unstable electromagnetic background, fading and growing as the range between them varied, but the surprisingly mild features were clearly displayed. Bassit was sitting staring at it with a look of hopeless dismay visible through his faceplate.

Bernice took a seat before the link and reciprocated by turning on its camera.

Smith smiled. It was an expression of satisfaction without a trace of humour. ‘Ah, there you are. Professor Summerfield. I so wanted to see you face to face, just this once.’

‘Before I die, you mean?’



‘Very possibly. I hold you largely responsible for the setbacks I have suffered. I am right in attributing the *Express*’s unexpected departure to your ingenuity?’

‘I’d think of it more as a team effort, but I certainly put in my six pennyworth.’

‘No matter, you will do. It is easier to focus all one’s displeasure on one individual, don’t you think?’

‘I couldn’t say. I try not to get paranoid about such things.’

‘I’m not paranoid, Professor, merely very angry. Anyway, you have now reduced me to employing the crudest tactics against you. I shall have to force the *Express* off the tracks, and hope to recover the *Imnulate* intact from the wreckage.’

‘Won’t that be a little dangerous for you as well?’

‘Not really. You see, I am flying a very special craft.’

‘So I noticed.’

‘It was built to explore the cloud islands of Thaon, in the interests of pure scientific research, naturally. I appropriated it to serve a more profitable use. It has special high thrust fast response attitude control jets, coupled with an adaptive computer stabilizing program. This allows me to manoeuvre freely even in *Tempest*’s notoriously unforgiving atmosphere, as you can see...’

The ship dropped down from somewhere above them into view through Bassit’s scarred window. Multiple spears of blue flame spouted from the recessed attitude thrusters in its sides, kicking the craft back on to a steady course as the violently shifting winds tried to wipe it from the sky.

‘It also has a specially toughened hull,’ Smith continued, ‘so it will come to no harm when it pushes you off the tracks. Goodbye, Professor...’

The craft banked towards them, filling the window. They instinctively ducked as it hurtled overhead, the blaze of the tailjet briefly turning night to day. Then the Shockwave struck, sending them staggering as the whole train yawed sickeningly. From somewhere under their feet came a scream of metal, and yellow sparks flew past the window.

Slowly they settled on an even keel again.

She could hear the beeping of a warning buzzer relayed over the phone link. Smith had pulled his head back from the pickup and was looking to one side. Wilver's voice could faintly be heard saying, 'That was too close, Smith. Employ restraint!'

'No, it wasn't close enough!' Smith retorted. 'How do you override this system?'

A third voice said, 'It's automatic unless we're in landing mode.'

'But I don't want to land, you fool. Cut the circuit!'

Underneath his calm eloquent veneer Smith was an angry and impatient man, Bernice realized. But how fragile was that mask and to what lengths would his obsession with obtaining the Imnulate drive him? No time like the present to find out.

'Having trouble. Smith?' she said loudly. 'You're big on threats but weak on execution. Can't you fly that thing? Didn't you remember to steal the operator's manual as well? And you've neglected to install external weaponry I see. Tut, tut. I thought you were a professional. We're just a bunch of amateurs, but we're getting away from you.'

'The respite is purely temporary, I assure you, Professor,' Smith rasped. Then aside: 'Disengage it. Tear it out if you have to!'

Bernice turned off the phone. 'When does the line pass through the next narrow section?' she asked Bassit urgently.

'Narrow?'

'Mountains, steep-sided valley, that sort of thing. Preferably with plenty of twists and turns in the track.'

Bassit checked his desk-top display. 'Er... Spinder's Pass. We'll be there in four minutes at this speed. We'll have to slow down.'

'No, we go as fast as we can. Now, can we do anything else to improve the odds?' she said half to herself. 'Small arms are no good and he'd ignore them anyway... something unexpected.' She turned to Bassit. 'I don't suppose you've got any emergency flares on board?'

‘Well, yes. There are launch tubes built into the engine roof-’

‘Are there now...’

‘But surely they won’t do any damage to -’

‘Sorry, no time to explain. Tell everybody to brace themselves - it’s going to be a bumpy ride!’

The *Express* was swaying wildly as Bernice made her way forward to the driver’s cab. Murcell was hunched intently over his controls, while Yorland was attending the engineering console on which several red lights were blinking.

‘Smith’s trying to run us off the track,’ she said.

‘So I guessed.’

‘But his ship won’t let him get close enough. It must have proximity sensors that automatically take over and steer it clear of any solid object.’

‘Then we’re safe.’

‘No, he’s cutting them out of the system. Where are the emergency flare controls?’

Yorland pointed to a flip-cover guarded toggle switch and button. ‘Throw to arm and press to fire. But why -’

‘You’ll see.’ She called over to Murcell, ‘How long to Spinder’s Pass?’

‘Er... about a minute.’

‘Know it well?’

‘Been through it a couple of hundred times.’

‘Good. Think you can do it blindfold?’

‘What?’

‘Here’s what you do...’

\* \* \*

The pilot of the *Kingfisher* snapped a cover panel back into place.

‘The auto-system is off line, Mr Smith,’ he reported.

‘Good. This time push them off the rails.’

‘This is unwise,’ Wilver said from the other acceleration couch. ‘I have my doubts that the Imnulate is on board.’

'I analysed all your reports and those of the police,' Smith retorted, 'and conclude there is little chance it could have been removed from the train at the time of the crime. The subsequent killing of Merch and the likely attempt on Ferlane indicate in all probability that it is still there.'

'Even so it may be damaged in the crash.'

'It's tough and the train is solidly built as we have learnt. There is a reasonable chance it will survive. In any case the Kedd will not mind a few cracks, but if we miss this opportunity the Immulate will be so closely guarded in future nobody will be able to get near it!'

The screens showed a bleak landscape unrolling before them. Black valleys and snowcapped peaks. Ahead these merged into a jagged mountain range whose summits were lost in the faintly luminous clouds. The line ran through a cleft between them. A single spear of brilliant white light shone out in the darkness where the glowing snake of the *Express* raced along the winding track.

The *Kingfisher* dropped out of the sky towards it.

'The terrain is unsuitable for such manoeuvrings,' Wilver said in alarm. 'Wait until they're clear on the other side.'

'No. Every minute brings them closer to Thule and means less time to find the Immulate. As it is we may have to use the ship to discourage any rescue parties from interfering while we search.'

'It's rather tight down there, Mr Smith,' the pilot said.

'This craft was built to be controllable whatever the conditions. Aim for the engine itself. If that topples the rest will follow.'

The *Kingfisher* hurtled along the line of the track as it snaked around the sheer side of a canyon whose floor was lost in darkness. They steadily overhauled the fleeing *Express*, and this time there was no proximity warning or overriding of the controls to interfere. The pilot eased them alongside until they were flying parallel with the train, gliding past its rows of lighted windows. Smith could see passengers staring out at them. Did they know they were about to die? Then they were opposite the engine. He could see its brilliant beams

swaying from side to side, alternately blazing against rock walls and stabbing out into the empty air as it took the banked bends. They would have themselves over in a minute, he thought ironically.

‘Now!’ he commanded.

The *Kingfisher* banked sideways towards the engine.

The train vanished as every light on it simultaneously went out.

Plunged into virtual darkness the *Kingfisher* flew through the point where the *Express* should have been. But it was no longer there.

Instinctively the pilot pulled back and up on the joystick, just as the air outside the hurtling craft seemed to explode in dazzling bolts of fire and bursting balls of crimson flame that licked around the ports. It was only natural that the pilot should flinch away from them, momentarily disorientated as he tried to switch back to flying by instruments alone. He saw they were drifting into the sheer rugged wall of the valley and tried to veer off, but it was too late for human reactions to save them now.

And there were no longer any operational mechanical safeguards to correct his error.

The *Kingfisher* grazed the rockface high above the monorail track with a shower of sparks, rebounded in an arc out across the canyon spinning wildly and struck its opposite wall full on.

The explosion lit up the mountains with a flash of intense yellow-white light. It illuminated the *Express*, still slowing under the full power of its brakes. A fireball boiled upward until it licked the lowest clouds. An incandescent mass of tangled wreckage dropped out of the flaming crater it had gouged in the mountainside and tumbled freely over and over into the depths with a shrieking roar. It struck the ice-rimmed river that ran along the canyon floor with a mighty splash, bursting into red-hot fragments that were swallowed up in a cloud of steam and smoke.

From the cab of the *Express*, Bernice watched the glowing remains until the curve of the track hid them from view.

‘Goodbye, Mr Smith,’ she said softly.

On the other side of the mountains, where the track ran straight and level over a snowfield, the *Polar Express* came to a halt. Yorland, together with his mechanics and maintenance ‘servers, began checking the train’s systems and making essential repairs. Meanwhile, contact was re-established with an anxious TGR control centre in Thule. Bernice steeled herself to make the rounds of the train assessing the casualties. It was while she was engaged in this depressing task that she found Tyne in a corner of the makeshift sickbay. He was sitting beside a body covered by a white sheet.

His face held an expression of bleak, uncomprehending dismay.

Gently, Bernice lifted a corner of the sheet. The still face underneath belonged to the woman who had asked after Tyne on the day of the near riot.

‘You had her listed as Lyn Masco,’ Tyne said in a faint voice, answering her unspoken question. ‘Apparently one of the windows in the upper deck was shot out and she was hit by a stray bolt. They say it was quick. I knew her as Lil, though that probably wasn’t her real name. “Lil the Look”. She kept watch or turned heads at the right moment so you could make a switch. The smoothest operator you could want to team with.’

‘So you weren’t working here alone.’

‘No...’ He buried his face in his hands. ‘But I wish I had been. The idea was for me to pass on the Imnulate to her for disposal once I’d rigged the cargo hatch for the drop, and then I’d stay in First Class and act innocent. That was why she was in another car. Or maybe we’d work out some

diversion, depending on the set-up. She'd have seen it through, whatever. She was the best kind, know what I mean? Never let you down.'

'Did she have any family?'

'I don't know. She never spoke of any.'

'Do you want who she really was to come out?'

'Can it be kept quiet?'

'I'll see what I can do.'

'I'd like to take her back to the outer belt. She hadn't got family, but there were friends. She deserves a proper send-off. I'll pay whatever's needed.'

Bernice looked at the grieving man and then about her at the battle-scarred carriage. Yes, she thought, but who pays for all of this? Smith and Wilver have gone, but there's still an account to be settled.

The final casualty totals were eight dead - three crew and five passengers - with seventeen more wounded and many minor injuries which Pell was still treating. In addition the bodies of eleven of Smith's raiders were still on board. Yorland was leaving a compartment in the rear service car unhealed to serve as a temporary mortuary.

Bernice and Bassit gave an account of what had occurred to the police and TGR management.

'All that suffering for a piece of carved crystal,' Bassit said, clearly deeply distressed. 'Such a waste and so pointless.'

'No,' Bernice gently corrected him. 'Smith and Wilver and his men died for a piece of blue crystal. That really was, pointless. The people on the *Express* died protecting their families and companions from something cruel and vicious. That wasn't a meaningless sacrifice.' On the screen the images of Hynds and Neelson both nodded. Bernice sighed, still unable to reconcile her own conscience. 'But I still wonder if it could have been avoided. Did we do the wrong thing? Perhaps we should have let Smith on board to search the train?'

'From his actions it's clear he was prepared to employ terrorist tactics quite ruthlessly,' Hynds said. 'If you had let



him on board, he might have killed just as many people trying to force your unknown thief to hand the Immolate over. Even if you had been able to give him what he wanted, he might have decided to leave no witnesses behind. Naturally there'll be an official inquiry, but in the circumstances I'm sure they'll agree you had no choice. We may know better when we find out more about both "Smith" and Wilver.'

'Yes, what about this Wilver person?' Neelson asked Bernice. 'How did you discover he was Smith's agent? You haven't explained what gave him away.'

Bernice smiled grimly. 'That was Smith's own fault, actually. He'd obviously planned for every eventuality, which is why he wanted an agent on the train, but he unintentionally gave him away. Wilver's job must have been to discover the location of the Immolate and as much as possible about the security around it, so that he could direct Smith's men straight to it when they sprang their trap. When the Immolate was stolen things got complicated. That was why Wilver kept on trying to be helpful all the time and offering his services, so he could find out how the investigation was progressing. It was him who searched the Versons' room, once he'd worked out they were Drellites, thinking they might have the Immolate. He was speaking the absolute truth when he said he wanted the Immolate found. But of course, it wasn't out of altruism.'

'Anyway, as I said, Smith gave the game away. After we'd been stopped by the blocked line and he called us up, Smith knew who I was when I replied even though I hadn't turned the vision on. That suggested some very up-to-date inside intelligence, since you were keeping a clampdown on the details of who was involved in the investigation at your end. I remembered Wilver had seen me go forward a couple of minutes before, but though it made me suspicious, I couldn't be sure. So I got Tyne, ironically one of the few people I could trust, to make up the fake Immolate and go through a little charade to flush the spy out. I had to assemble all the first-class passengers in one room to make it work, just in case it was one of the others. Then I pushed things along until

Wilver, eager to get his hands on the Imnulate, was forced to show his true colours. Then it was best to let him leave of his own accord so we could plan our escape.'

'But how did he contact Smith?' Neelson wondered.

'Probably through the regular comm system for most of the journey, using some sort of code. Not so unusual; plenty of legitimate businessmen use them. But after the ambush when Smith was only a few hundred metres away, I think he used a short range transmitter. Since he was never without his umbrella and hat, and the umbrella turned out to be a concealed gun, I guess the hat held the transmitter - and possibly other surveillance equipment so he could listen in on our progress during the investigation.'

'That sounds very likely,' Hynds agreed. 'We should be able to track down the relay to Smith's craft. It may have something to do with the Skystation. Actually, they've just reported a suspicious death there

Two hours later they were still going over details and deciding what news should be released to the public, once the relatives of the dead and injured had been informed, when Yorland came into Bassit's office. He looked tired but relieved as he made his report.

'We've closed off the damaged external coupler doors and patched and braced all the holed windows until they're up to spec. I've got the air plants working at maximum to filter and re-oxygenate. The train will smell like a suit locker for a few days, but that can't be helped. We'll need a complete workshop overhaul and service when we get in, but as long as we don't exceed a hundred kph, we'll be able to reach Thule under our own power.' Bernice saw Bassit's face lift.

'Well done, Mr Yorland,' Neelson said.

At seventeen thirty that evening, the *Express* slowly got under way again.

The weather looked set fair at last, and even at a modest speed, they would reach Thule by morning the next day. A little later Yorland announced the air was back to an

acceptable standard, and they gratefully removed their suits. Jean-Louis returned to his synthesizer and rapidly prepared a selection of hot, sweet and savoury finger meals for the whole train. He sent them out via a relay of 'servers and they were welcomed with spontaneous applause when they appeared. Slowly a strange calm descended upon the train. Some had returned to their compartments to fall into an exhausted sleep, while others were too stimulated by what they had experienced to think of rest. Apart from those who had been close to the dead, whose grief would have to follow the normal course, the rest were simply glad to be alive. In a few hours they would be in Thule. Until then they could let themselves relax at last, knowing that they had survived the worst that fate could throw at them.

Bernice watched them almost enviously.

She couldn't sleep or rest, and prowled the corridors and public rooms, hands thrust deep in her pockets and head bowed. Her thoughts were a jumbled mess, the consequence of too many surprises and too little sleep over the last four short but very busy days. Somewhere in the confusion she had the feeling she had seen or heard something significant. Or perhaps several things which seemed innocent separately but when put together meant... what?

She found herself in the First Class lounge and ordered a drink from the 'server on duty. Just a little, she told herself. She'd gone without for three days. Perhaps now she needed that vital lift.

The lounge was already occupied. In one corner Klemp's party was gathered round the grand piano, which had survived the raid unscathed. To Bernice's surprise Trinny was sitting at it picking out a tune quietly, if not particularly well, while Debra was frowning over some old genuine sheet music scores and looking as though she might be about to commit a song. Perhaps they had more talent, or at least more nerve, than she gave them credit for. Brandon was sitting beside them with his leg propped up on a rest, while Deek's arm was in a sling. Klemp himself was beaming at them paternally and probably wondering how much surviving

the journey firmly on the side of law and order would improve his reputation. He raised his glass convivially to Bernice and she reciprocated.

In the opposite corner of the lounge Clarris Sommers and Denn Lankril sat side by side holding hands. Bernice walked over to them, mildly surprised at their open display of affection.

'I hope I'm not going to have to break up a fight again if your father finds you like this?' she asked.

Clarris beamed up at her slightly starry-eyed. 'It's all right; Father knows. It was because Denn was so brave when he saved us from those men who broke into our compartment.' She turned back to Denn. 'He was wonderful...'

'Lucas hasn't had a miraculous change of heart,' Denn admitted, 'but he can't call me names any more and pretend I'm not good enough to see Clarris. So he agreed - at least, as long as it's somewhere public.'

'And I won't make it any more public,' Bernice said, withdrawing gracefully. It really was an ill wind, she thought.

The Versons entered the lounge. Warwick walking with the aid of a crutch. They found seats and quietly ordered drinks from the 'server.

'How's the leg?' Bernice asked, settling beside them.

'The doc says it'll heal OK, given the right treatment,' Warwick said.

'Sorry you got caught up in that little charade of mine. I couldn't tell you the truth until Wilver was clear.'

'We understand,' Ellyn said. She looked at Warwick proudly. 'My husband will insist on being brave and foolhardy.'

'Now then, Ell,' he gently chided her. 'I couldn't let him take it without trying, could I? I thought it was the real thing.'

Ellyn smiled sadly, looking about her. 'I cannot believe our Imnulate has caused so much suffering when it was meant to bring people together in harmony and love. We feel... well, responsible.'

'Don't blame yourselves for the likes of Smith,' Bernice said.

‘We don’t... but we didn’t want to look as though we were ashamed of our beliefs either, and were hiding away in our cabin. That’s why we came up here. If anybody wishes to talk to us about what has happened they can, and we shall try to explain the truth.’

Her husband was frowning and rubbing his injured leg.

‘I know our priest would have a fit if he heard me say it, but after this I almost wish the Imnulate will never be found.’

‘Warwick!’

‘Sorry, Ell. But it does sort of make you wonder... if it brings this much misery.’

‘Unfortunately, a physical symbol will always be a potential hostage to fortune,’ Bernice said. ‘If what you believe is worthwhile, then it can’t be contained or controlled by a hunk of crystal. But people confuse the abstract with the material. The Imnulate’s become a symbol of power, and unfortunately some people are impressed by such things and have to possess them.’

She frowned. Again there was that tantalizing feeling that part of the solution was in her grasp. But it was as slippery as a lost bar of soap in the bath, and it vanished into the dark recesses of her mind once again.

She heard a child’s voice on the stairs, and Tallia Astall appeared with her father and mother close behind. Nyris smiled wearily at Bernice.

‘She wants to see if any stars are visible yet. She won’t go to sleep without checking, and our windows are so scorched and cracked we can’t tell.’

Tallia had run to the curving observation windows and was peering out and up excitedly. ‘Now there may not be anything to see yet,’ her father warned her. ‘Wait until we get to Thule. We’ll have plenty of chances then.’

‘You’d think after what’s happened she’d have forgotten,’ Nyris said. ‘She was terrified during the fighting, but an hour later she was asking about the stars again.’

‘Up there. Daddy. Look!’ Tallia said excitedly, pointing.

‘Can I turn down the lights?’ Lance Astall asked the rest of the lounge. There was a general murmur of assent, and he

operated the switch. The room lights dimmed. Everybody moved over to the windows, drawing Bernice with them.

A grey icefield stretched away into the night, faintly lit by slightly lighter swirling clouds. At first Bernice could see nothing, but then, as her eyes adjusted, she made out the ragged line of deeper darkness almost directly above them. As she watched it opened, revealing a velvet blackness. And there, amid a shimmering curtain of auroral lights, were the stars. There were a few stifled murmurs of appreciation from the adults. Tallia Astall was less inhibited.

‘Oh... they’re beautiful! Like diamonds in your ring, Mummy,’ she said.

‘Well, they’re really suns a long way off,’ her father said gently.

‘I know that, Daddy,’ came the slightly indignant reply. ‘Can I go to them one day?’

‘One day. If you’re good and go to sleep when you’re told  
Bernice smiled and left quietly.

Down on the lower deck she passed through the coupler module. Where the inner set of the module’s external airlock doors should have been was an empty blackened frame, sealed off with heavy plastic sheeting and hung with garish tapes warning passengers that it was out of order. She walked down the corridor of A car, past the empty compartments of Wilver and Merch. Tyne, she recalled, had moved into Ferlane’s vacant cabin for the last few hours of the journey. This thought turned her steps towards the surgery.

Ferlane was still unconscious and there had been no change in his condition. Bernice stared down at his pale still face for a long time, hoping the apparent expression of calm it wore actually meant something.

The rest of the surgery was packed with folding beds holding the wounded, and an adjacent storeroom had been commandeered and turned into an additional makeshift ward. Tyne’s temporary cell was also in use, and she reminded herself again to remember to put in a good word for him. Pell and his assistants deserved more than just a good

word, and she hoped TGR would find some suitable reward for their dedication. They looked exhausted, but were still working, determined to see it through until they arrived at Thule.

‘Thule offered to send out a relief team in a tender,’ Pell told her wearily, ‘but all the patients are stable now, and transferring them between trains would not help. What they need are full hospital facilities.’ He looked across the close-packed beds and their sleeping occupants. ‘I just wonder...’

‘Yes?’

‘What if we find the Imnulate’s been on the train all the time but the thief did not have the courage to hand it over?’ And an uncharacteristic expression of anger filled his normally mild face.

Bernice considered pointing out that it might have made no difference, but she was not entirely convinced of that herself. Some things they would never know for certain.

She left the surgery feeling guilty and inadequate and wishing she had been a better detective. Her mind would not clear, but at least pacing about had tired her. She hoped she could sleep.

Back in Car A she came upon Yorland in the corridor, tool belt around his waist, checking a wiring conduit.

‘Aren’t you going to take a rest?’ she said. ‘You deserve it.’

‘So do you.’

‘I won’t really get any peace until I have some answers. I don’t feel as though my job’s over yet.’

He grinned sympathetically and gestured at the work in hand. ‘Same here. Somebody’s got to keep her running until we make Thule.’

Running? Bernice thought. Running water. Why did that seem significant? ‘Uh... something I meant to ask. How does the plumbing work on board?’

Yorland looked slightly surprised. ‘Well, it’s fairly standard, like a spacecraft closed system. Pressurized fresh water supply. Smallbore sewage system leading to settling tanks in each car. The solids settle out and the fluid is evaporated off, purified and recycled.’

‘What happens to the solids? The tanks must get pretty full after a few days.’

‘They’re normally emptied while we’re in a station. They process it for organic fertilizer for Terran crops, like the rest of the sewage. That should have been done at Roaring Canyon... but you know what happened there. There’s spare capacity. We’ll arrive full but not overflowing.’ He shook his head. ‘But if you think the Innulate was flushed away into them, forget it. Even if it’d somehow been reduced to small enough fragments to pass the shredders in each unit, the tank filters themselves would have caught them. We often find pins and earrings and that sort of thing in them that people have dropped down toilet pans.’

Something inside her wouldn’t let the idea go. ‘Sorry, but can you show me the works right now? I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t think it was important.’

Yorland shrugged, closed the conduit, and led the way down the corridor to the small discreet door of the ‘server’s ‘kennel’ beside Lankril’s compartment. He opened it with his pass key and switched on a light.

‘After we talked about them the other day I had them all checked out,’ he assured her.

The narrow room inside was windowless and no bigger than a cupboard. One wall was covered with various-sized pipes studded with taps and valves, cable conduits and junction boxes. At the back, plugged into power sockets, were a couple of ‘servers awaiting their next call to duty.

‘The tanks are all under the deck,’ Yorland explained. ‘You couldn’t get at them without tearing up half the floors in the carriage, but you can monitor everything from here.’ He opened the lid of a box mounted halfway up the wall fed by a dozen slim pipes and emptied by one of larger bore. Inside a clear panel showed a series of graded filter trays. He turned a tap on the side of the unit and foaming water filled the box then drained away.

‘Well... they’ve caught something,’ Yorland said. ‘Not sure what...’ He opened the panel releasing a waft of disinfectant, reached inside with a disposable cloth from a wall dispenser,



and drew out several slivers of twisted black plastic, trailing a spray of hair-thin filaments. Embedded within them were lines of tiny crystals.

'Looks like they've been cut up by a shredder unit.' He dabbed them dry, then prodded them about with his fingertip until they formed two rectangular blocks.

'The memory chips from Merch's communicator and office case?' Bernice suggested.

'Looks like it. We can check the serial numbers to be sure.'

'Any idea which compartment they came from?'

He shook his head. 'Could have been any one in the car.'

'And what about retrieving useful data?'

'You might reassemble them properly with micro-manipulators, but I'll bet they've been blanked either by intense heat or exposure to another unit's wipe and re-format field. That would erase even protected data. Sorry.'

Bernice absently scratched the edge of the cast on her arm whilst staring blankly at the broken components. They resembled the pieces of a crude puzzle, and the symbolism seemed to taunt her.

'But what was on them that was worth killing for in the first place?' she wondered. Yorland shrugged helplessly. Water hissed and gurgled through the pipes beside her. She closed her eyes, chasing the elusive key, determined not to let it escape her this time. What was it about water? Who had said they heard it and why did it matter anyway? The images danced in her head: Tralbet, Tyne, Merch, Wilver... An unexpected expression on a face in a crowd came to her. It didn't fit... or perhaps it fitted another picture. Storms and stars. Stars? Where did stars fit into it? Don't lose it this time...

'YES!' she shouted, and punched the air.

'You OK, Professor?' Yorland asked anxiously.

Bernice took a deep breath and let it out slowly. 'I'm fine. Absolutely fine,' she assured him.

## **From the diary of Professor Bernice Summerfield**

... so that's how it was done.

I've written the solution here and told Bassit, just in case anything unlikely happens to me overnight. It was a shock the way all the pieces suddenly dropped into place to form a complete whole, almost like a physical blow. Yorland thought I'd had a fit for a moment.

I've got a couple of calls to make just to confirm a few details, then I can grab some sleep. I need it! And I will sleep because at last I know.

I know how the Imnulate was stolen.

And knowing that was all it took to work out who did it.

*Extract ends*

## ANATOMY OF A CRIME

It was dawn by the clock, though there was no sunrise during this season so far north. Overhead the high clouds glowed with the cold radiance of auroral fire, illuminating the rolling wastes of the ice-cap with a multicoloured twilight and populating the pits and jagged ridges with shifting ghostly shadows. A line of pylons marched across the white wilderness, lifting the monorail track clear of the ground-hugging ice storms. Along it the *Polar Express* raced like a comet towards home.

In the First Class dining car they watched the magical scene through the scarred and patched windows as they breakfasted. The mood was subdued and the meal was largely consumed in silence. A reaction had set in to the high emotions of the previous day. For most of them nothing again would ever equal the elation of knowing they had faced death and survived. Ahead of them was only the gauntlet of reporters to run and statements to give. An anticlimax of questions and confusion which none wanted to face.

Then, towards the end of the meal, Bassit appeared and called for their attention.

'If all the A car passengers would be kind enough to go up to the lounge when they have finished. An announcement will be made there shortly on behalf of TGR.'

'Is this about compensation?' Lucas Sommers asked.

'In a manner of speaking, sir,' said Bassit. 'It will all be made clear upstairs.'

They finished eating, and in ones and twos they ascended. Bernice was already waiting for them and watched them take their seats in silence.

Monty Klemp, radiating amiability, showed it took more than an attempted hijacking to disturb him. He was flanked by Trinny and Debra looking surprisingly fresh and glamorous, with Deek and Brandon on the outside of them. Jordan Tyne settled a little apart from the others, his face drawn and haggard. Nathan Costermann sat with folded hands and looked grave. Sommers was still outwardly stern and uncompromising, but this was underlain with a suspicion of tiredness. He apparently affected not to notice that Denn Lankril was sitting on the other side of Clarris from him. Had he accepted that he would lose her soon, Bernice wondered? Finally Warwick and Ellyn Verson took their places on a sofa, automatically holding hands. Bassit stood a little behind them all, silent and impassive.

Only when they were all seated did Bernice speak.

'I know you've got packing to do, but I promise I'll be finished before we reach Thule.' She glanced at the panel on the opposite lounge wall displaying its much revised ETA, then turned back to them and gave a tired smile.

'I used to wonder why they did this in detective stories. It's so clichéd. But now I think I understand. Apart from it being a useful narrative device, it's only fair after what everybody's been through. You've all been under the greatest suspicion from those of us who were carrying out the investigation, not to mention your fellow passengers. You deserve to know the truth first. And of course, the guilty party deserves to suffer a little.'

'What are you saying, Professor?' Warwick Verson asked.

'I'm saying I know who stole the Imnulate.'

She had their complete and undivided attention. Eleven faces stared at her in varying degrees of shock and anticipation. Then Klemp broke the silence.

'Is it somebody here now?' he asked.

'Oh yes.'

Heads turned uneasily, and there was a slight shuffling of feet as they unconsciously drew themselves away from their neighbours.

'Spit it out. Prof,' said Klemp darkly. 'Who did it?'

‘Just bear with me. Explanations first. You see, I don’t have the actual conclusive evidence yet, though I expect to get it shortly after we reach Thule. But I know I’m right. It’s the only way it all makes sense.’

‘But is the Immulate still on the train?’ Ellyn Verson pleaded. ‘We must know. Did we go through all that suffering for nothing?’

‘I’ll tell you where it is in a minute,’ Bernice assured her. ‘I only realized the truth last night. Though it wouldn’t have helped us against Smith even if I’d worked it out sooner.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’ll understand if you follow my reasoning, and that means working backwards.’

‘Let’s consider the hijacking first. Have you wondered how Smith originally learnt the Immulate was going to be on the *Express*? He must have known well in advance to get Wilver on board to spy out the land. And why go to such ruthless and expensive lengths to get it? The cost of the operation must have been tremendous, so he must have had a very certain buyer to risk so much.’

‘He was probably an agent of the Kedd-Drell,’ Warwick Verson said.

‘Very likely. For those of you who don’t know, the Kedd-Drell are a militant faction of the Drellite faith, the original owners of the Immulate. Isn’t that right, Mr Costermann?’

Costermann blinked in surprise. ‘Sorry, Professor. I know nothing about them. I’d never heard of them before until Mrs Verson mentioned them yesterday.’

‘No. They were news to me too. They’re certainly not people you want to invite on a long journey. But I wonder how they found out about the transfer of the Immulate? I suspect by spying on their more orthodox colleagues.’

The Versons looked shocked at the suggestion.

‘But then of course, how did the Orthodox Drell learn of the transfer? Were you ever told where the information came from?’ Bernice asked them.

‘Never,’ said Ellyn Verson. ‘We assumed it was some sympathizer on Tempest who had access to inside information.’

‘Well, maybe,’ Bernice allowed. ‘But then why would the same person contact Mr Tyne? An anonymous letter, I believe you said, Tyne. You’re not a follower of Drell, are you?’

Tyne shook his head. ‘If I’d got my hands on the thing I’d have broken it down and sold it for its straight carat value,’ he said tonelessly, glancing briefly at Costermann. ‘It wasn’t exactly the Immolate itself I was after.’

‘Quite. For the benefit of the rest of you, Mr Tyne bears Mr Costermann and the late Tralbet a grudge regarding an old disagreement over gambling winnings. Our informed source seems to have known about that as well. As a matter of interest, who did you tell about it, Tyne?’

‘What? Nobody. I didn’t come out of it too well, did I?’

‘And you, Mr Costermann?’

‘Some of the others involved. Perhaps half a dozen people. I might be able to recollect some names, but it was a few years ago, you understand.’

‘And there’s no telling who they might have passed it on to as an amusing anecdote: card-sharper gets his just desserts, and so on.’

‘Quite true, I’m afraid.’

‘And would any of them have born you a grudge then or since?’

‘Not as far as I know.’

‘Well, let’s try another tack. Why did somebody try to kill Garv Ferlane?’

There was a murmur of surprise.

‘Yes, I’m afraid what happened to Ferlane was no accident,’ Bernice continued. ‘Somebody, let’s call them “X”,

sabotaged his life support pack. We think it was because he had been making requests for certain information a few hours before. I’m sure Ferlane had nothing concrete to go on, just instinct, but his new line of inquiry made somebody very worried indeed. Perhaps the potential danger only existed in X’s own mind and Ferlane would never have made the

connection X feared. But there's an ancient saying that the wicked flee when no man pursueth, and X had already been rattled by an earlier piece of misfortune I'll come to in a minute. So X took advantage of the landslide to try to get rid of Ferlane. It was a very hit or miss method, but it might easily have been mistaken for a genuine accident so there was nothing to lose. But how did X know about the information Ferlane had requested?

Bernice pulled the plastic bag containing the charred device Yorland had found from her pocket, and held it up for all to see.

'Because a line tap had been planted in the conduit above the A car corridor that carried all the train's communication circuitry. It was burnt out when we found it. Actually we even have a recording taken by a door monitor camera of the shadow X cast as it was put in place, though we didn't realize what it was the first time we viewed it. It was made by an arm reaching upward to the ceiling, opening the conduit cover, and slipping the line tap into place. Simple explanation once you know, isn't it? Only took a few seconds and it was the dead of night so there was little danger of being seen. You see, X had no intention of getting off the train early, and wanted to be kept up to date on the inevitable investigation that would follow the discovery of the theft. A methodical planner is our X.

'It paid off too. The line tap was also used to generate interference on Merch's communicator for a very crucial few hours, which probably contributed to it burning out later while monitoring Ferlane's calls. The interference was nothing too extreme, but enough to delay Merch transmitting X's identity to some external data store as insurance. If he'd got through it might have saved his life.'

'I don't understand.' Sommers snapped. 'Are you saying Merch was a blackmailer?'

'Yes. I think he was blackmailing, or rather intending to blackmail, X: the person who stole the Immolate and murdered Tralbet. That was why Merch allowed somebody into his compartment so late at night, when everybody else

was barring their doors. He must have underestimated X's determination, or else overestimated his own position and precautions. Either way he ended up dead. X then ransacked his compartment quietly but systematically to see if Merch had left any incriminating information behind. The memory cores of Merch's personal link and computer were removed in case the information was stored on them as a time-coded message to the police, for instance. We've since found them, by the way, though their data's probably been deleted.

'And so we come back to the original crime. The theft of the Immolate and the killing of Tralbet. X appears to have been one of those people who visited Mr Costermann's apartment on the first day out. As X entered or left, he or she placed a piece of foil-covered card in the door jamb to prevent the lock closing properly. Later that night X apparently returned and used a capsule of knockout gas to render Tralbet and Mr Costermann unconscious so X could steal the Immolate. But the gas was not completely effective on Narg biology. Tralbet was rendered confused and semiconscious, but still a danger. In a panic, X picked up the nearest available weapon, an ornamental paper knife from Mr Costermann's desk set, and stabbed Tralbet fatally. Then X used Mr Costermann's thumb to open the outer lid of the MaxSec case, somehow removed the Immolate from the interior unit, and left. The timing of the crime suggested the Immolate might somehow have been smuggled off the train at Spume Lake. X might have gone with it, or passed it on to an accomplice while remaining on board in apparent innocence.

'And that's where we came in.'

'Isn't it possible that Merch was your "X" and not a blackmailer?' Costermann suggested, breaking the silence. 'That he had an accomplice on board with whom he had some disagreement, and it was he, or she, who killed him? That also seems to be consistent with what we know.'

'Perhaps,' Bernice agreed. 'But though Merch had a less than perfect past, there is nothing to indicate he was not exactly what he seemed to be, and came to Tempest purely



on company business. He was on the *Express* simply by chance. Something X could not have planned for.

‘On the other hand, the authorities have found out that your invaluable secretary and bodyguard, Tralbet, had been receiving anonymous payments into his account for some months.’

‘Somebody was paying him secretly?’ said Costermann, gaping at her in amazement. ‘I can’t believe it!’

‘It’s perfectly true.’

‘Then... he was an accomplice to the robbery? And perhaps the source of the leak as well? He did know when the transfer was going to take place, and of course, he knew about Tyne... though I still don’t see why he should have involved him.’

‘No, there’s no apparent sense in that, is there?’ Bernice agreed. ‘However, it does seem likely that Tralbet was killed by whoever was paying him, either to shut him up or to keep his cut for themselves. Perhaps both. I noticed Tralbet seemed a little morose the first time I met him, and Deek here confirmed I was reading his expression correctly. Obviously he knew something was going on and felt uneasy about it.’

Costermann considered, then nodded slowly. ‘Yes, I think you may be right.’

‘So Tralbet’s killing was not unintentional, but simply made to look so,’ Bernice continued. ‘Perhaps the gas was to have been Tralbet’s alibi, together with the piece of foil-wrapped card used on the door lock.’

‘You mean Tralbet might have put that there?’ Costermann said.

‘It could have just as easily been placed to make it look like an outside job, don’t you agree? But then we come to a problem. If Tralbet was always intended to die, as it now seems, why didn’t the thief use a more efficient weapon? A modest-sized knife against somebody as big as Tralbet, even partly anaesthetized, is a risky option unless you got lucky... or know exactly where to strike. But we’ve now decided it was preplanned, forget luck. Who *knew* the knife was going to be there?’

‘One of the people who’d been in my room looking at the Immolate.’

‘But how many people would recognize a sheathed paper knife these days? Pell and Ferlane didn’t at first when we were examining Tralbet’s body. I do, but then antiquities are a special interest of mine. Was the thief and murderer as observant and knowledgeable? In its sheath it looked like part of the ornamentation of the pen mount. And who would bother looking for such a thing when there’s the Immolate to admire, or at the very least the MaxSec case to examine and your lecture on its functions to absorb?’

‘It may have been lying loose on the desk that night,’ said Costermann. ‘I’m not sure...’

‘Really? You’re such a neat person, I wouldn’t think you’d just leave it lying about. But you see my problem. I think this was planned by somebody who already knew you were going to bring that paper knife along as part of your personal effects. But how? They could hardly have asked Tralbet without arousing his suspicions.’

‘Then it was somebody who had seen it before in my house.’

‘Where do you keep it there?’

‘In my study.’

‘A reasonably private room, I assume? How many people present here right now have been in your study in the last year or two, say? And for long enough to allow them to recognize the desk set and know what it contained, and then recall that knowledge in a split second when face to face with Tralbet?’

‘You know Denn Lankril was in my house. He may have

‘But Denn Lankril has an alibi for the time of the crime which we’re quite satisfied with. No, there was only one person who knew a knife would be within easy reach when it was needed,’ Bernice said simply. ‘Somebody who automatically knew it was there from years of familiarity and didn’t need any prompting when thinking of a convenient “makeshift” weapon to hand when they needed it. That was an oversight on your part, Costermann, when you were

working out how to steal the Imnulate from yourself and kill  
Tralbet!

The silence in the lounge was absolute for perhaps ten seconds.

All eyes were riveted upon Costermann seated in his chair and Bernice standing squarely before him. The only signs that the whole scene was not frozen in time was the slight tremor of the carriage and the subdued whisper of wind from outside.

Then Costermann said, 'Professor Summerfield, what are you talking about?'

There was only incredulous surprise in his wide eyes and baffled tone. There was no trace of guilt in his expression or words.

Bernice continued remorselessly: 'I made an assumption at the start of this business that there were a round dozen most likely suspects. Well, that was wrong: there should have been thirteen. But you'd set yourself up to look like one of the victims, so I automatically discounted you. Just as you intended.'

'This is utter nonsense. Professor,' Costermann said sharply. 'You admitted earlier that you had no proof. This is completely misguided conjecture. I must say I am disappointed in you. If you have nothing more coherent and constructive to say then I shall leave.'

He started to rise, but Klemp made a quick gesture and Deek stepped forward with surprising speed for someone of his bulk and laid a huge hand on Costermann's shoulder. Costermann found himself pressed firmly back down into his chair again.

'Let's hear the Professor out,' Klemp grated ominously.

'Thanks,' Bernice said absently, looking down at Costermann with undisguised contempt. 'So, I disappoint you, do I? Is that because I got drunk the first night out and so disqualified myself as a potential suspect for the theft of the Innulate? That is why you got me to Tempest, isn't it?'

'I refuse to answer such an absurd accusation,' Costermann said stiffly.

'Well, let's see how absurd everybody else thinks it is. I've felt uneasy since I finished my lectures in Carlsbad. Oh, the hospitality was fine, but my unconscious was trying to tell me something, which I misinterpreted as a touch of angst and self-doubt. It persisted even after you welcomed me so warmly at your party. That welcome was perfectly genuine, but not for the reason I thought. In fact I was being used from the beginning by a ruthless individual who's been pretending to be vulnerable, modest and fallible all through this whole affair. That's you.'

'Are we now to believe you are psychic, Professor?' Costermann sneered back at her. 'Do you suffer such delusions often? You were invited to Tempest to give a series of lectures to our Archaeological Society, nothing more.'

'Yes, I wondered about that. So I called up Preston Galloway last night - you wouldn't know, of course, because your line tap isn't functioning any more. You see, when we were attending your little dinner party, he revealed he had doubts about inviting me, but said he had allowed himself to be talked round. When I asked him he remembered that it was you who had done the persuading, and even that you'd been quite forceful about the matter.'

'Really!' said Costermann.

'Then on a hunch I also asked what other clubs and societies you belonged to. Among the list were amateur dramatics and the local Magic Circle. You were really quite good, Galloway said. Useful talents in the current circumstances.'

'Oh. And I suppose I used magic to remove the Innulate from the MaxSec case, did I? You can speculate that it is physically possible for me to have killed Tralbet, though for

what possible motive I cannot imagine, but there is no way I could have bypassed that security system. I'm an ex-chemist, not a computer expert, and that is a matter of simple fact. Therefore there must have been a third party - your mysterious "X" - involved. Find X and you have your thief and murderer.'

'He's got a point,' Tyne said softly. 'I know how tough a MaxSec case is.'

'You say you've got this whole thing worked out, Prof,' Klemp said. 'Then produce the goods. That would make your case a whole lot tighter.'

'I'm afraid I can't do that,' Bernice said simply, 'because you see the Imnulate was never on the train in the first place.'

Again silence ruled in the lounge, filled with stupefied thoughts and stifled incredulous gasps. This time Warwick Verson broke it.

'But we all saw the Imnulate in the case! I even touched it! It was real and solid.'

'Sorry, but you were deceived again,' Bernice said. 'Perhaps you feel you should know the Imnulate instinctively, but apparently it's not so. What you and the rest of us saw was a fake. We were being used by Costermann, so we would corroborate his story of theft to the police and the insurance company.'

'But even if it was a fake, it couldn't have been removed from the MaxSec case,' Tyne said. 'We know how it works. The surface pattern's locked into the scanning system. Even if it was broken up it would still trigger the alarms when you tried to remove it.'

'Yes, we all got that lecture from Costermann,' Bernice agreed. 'And I got it again from a representative of the firm who made it, as did Costermann himself when the possibility of transferring the Imnulate was first discussed some months ago, no doubt. That's when he saw the flaw in the system which he realized he could exploit. MaxSec really will have to redesign those things, they're too elaborate. Costermann himself has already given you a clue when he admitted his

former profession. Ferlane was probing into his current business interests and may have been getting closer to the answer as well, at least in Costermann's eyes. Costermann realized it would only take a little free association with an old scandal and medical products to work out how he did it. That was why he tried to kill Ferlane. Remember: he was suited up and nobly volunteering before any of us. That was his excuse to visit the locker room before it got busy and sabotage Ferlane's backpack, guessing that he'd go outside to help sooner or later.'

'But what was Ferlane on to?' Klemp asked.

She held up her arm so they could see the glistening cast.

'Costermann owns Integrated Polymers, which makes this sort of stuff. According to Dr Pell, it'll simply dissolve away once it's done its job. Things are not always what they seem, as young Tallia Astall reminded me, when she likened the stars to her mother's diamonds.'

She saw understanding dawning in their eyes.

'Costermann made an exact copy of the Innulate, cast from the original, in a plastic that could be dissolved by the application of the proper solvent, which he brought with him. Along with a few other items.'

'Wait a minute, Professor,' Costermann said. 'This ingenious hypothesis does not stand up to reason. A plastic replica may fool the casual observer, but not an expert. Challis and Lyne sent one of their people with a jewellery expert to appraise the Innulate before it was locked inside the case the very morning we left Carlsbad. They'll testify it was the genuine article. Unless you're suggesting they're both involved in this fantastic scheme?'

'No, but I think they're simply fallible like the rest of us. You're an amateur magician, and much of stage magic relies on misdirection. Apart from Galloway, I also contacted Challis and Lyne and got the number of their representative who visited you. And do you know, he recalls that just after they'd validated the Innulate but before they put it in the MaxSec case, a picture suddenly fell off the wall of your study for no reason. Gave them both quite a start. Naturally

they turned aside from the Innulate for a second or two. And *that* was when you made the switch. They put the fake Innulate in the case themselves. The police will be checking your study for trick panels in desks and suspicious wall hangings... and for the real Innulate of course.'

'I wish them luck,' Costermann said levelly. 'But why am I supposed to have gone to all these incredible lengths?'

'I guess a couple of reasons. First: there was a scandal concerning one of your companies a few years ago. People died and one of your managers committed suicide - or did he? I'm guessing that's what Tralbet found out. Or perhaps he was your hit man and started to get greedy? It was you who was paying him to keep quiet, of course. Careless of him to accept the payments in anonymous funds, but it did set him up as a potential informant to some third party. How long did that go on for until you saw a way of killing two, or is it three, birds with one stone?'

'Do go on. Professor,' Costermann said levelly, 'I enjoy a good fantasy.'

'Very well. You also were being pestered by the Drell over the Innulate. But you hadn't any intention of giving it up. I really should have known that from the beginning. Nobody who builds a terrace like yours out over a canyon would ever give in to pressure so easily; your ego would never allow it. Then you saw how you could turn the situation to your advantage. What if you faked a robbery? You'd keep the real Innulate, collect the insurance, be rid of the Drell and eliminate Tralbet all in one go.

'But you wanted plenty of potential suspects around; people who everybody knew bore you grudges. I think Denn Lankril's presence was a little fortuitous, but I'm sure you'd noted when Lucas Sommers and Mr Klemp made their regular trips. So you arranged to make the transfer when they were both on board.'

Klemp glowered at Costermann. 'Were you setting me up for this?' Costermann ignored him.

'I think so,' Bernice said. 'Or at least to muddy the waters along with the rest of us. He made certain I knew of your



reputation, building you up as an obvious suspect even as I became less useful that way myself, by reason of intoxication. In fact he was always ready to cast suspicion – at everyone but himself, naturally. Then there was Tyne: a professional thief who could be relied upon to bring along nice incriminating evidence for the police to find.’ She smiled grimly at Costermann. ‘Such a helpful letter you sent him.

‘But involving him was actually a mistake, even though it did introduce a phantom mystery figure who had a grudge against you, designed to send the police off on another false trail. I suppose you had Tyne tracked down and so learnt his real name, but unfortunately nobody but you and Tralbet would have known about what you did to Tyne, and Tralbet didn’t strike me as a great small-talker. And Tyne never told anyone since he came out of it badly.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Warwick Verson.

‘Costermann only had Tralbet recover his *own* gambling losses from Tyne. He would hardly then have boasted about it to the others Tyne fleeced, since they would have asked why he didn’t get their money back at the same time.

‘Tyne’s letter also helped to suggest a leak at the insurance company offices, and everybody would presume the key code for the MaxSec case had gone the same way. But you didn’t know there was also a timelock built into it, did you? Ferlane told me that. Even with the correct code it couldn’t have been opened at that time. But the Immolate was gone so we assumed, despite the time lock, that the system had been negated by some master thief.

‘But we were looking for the wrong type of specialist all along. Not a computer expert or an engineer, but a chemist.

‘We should have realized sooner that we’d really eliminated all the possibilities, and what was left, by the Sherlockian method, was the solution. The *real* Immolate couldn’t have been stolen, therefore it hadn’t been stolen – at least, not in the normal sense.

‘Of course you never reckoned on the fanaticism of the Kedd-Drell and their hiring of Smith, because you’d never heard of them. You were genuinely shocked by the hijacking

and worked frantically on the bomb - but then you were also saving your own skin along with the rest of us. All the while you were sick to your heart because you realized your own clever scheming had so spectacularly backfired. And naturally you couldn't come forward with the truth. Smith wouldn't have believed you. All you could do was keep quiet and suffer.

'Of all the faces in the lounge when Tyne came in with the fake Immulate, I remember yours was the only one that showed anything like *surprise*. Everybody else still hoped the Immulate would turn up, but you alone *knew* it could not.'

Denn Lankril was looking at Costermann in growing disgust. 'So how did he set it up - the actual robbery, I mean?'

'He deliberately staged it early in the journey,' Bernice explained. 'That was not only to tie in with the Spume Lake stop, but to pre-empt somebody like Mr Tyne from confusing things by making a genuine attempt.'

'He'd brought two gas capsules along, one smaller one made of more of his dissolving plastic. He used that to incapacitate Tralbet, allowing him to breathe enough so that it showed up in the autopsy, and then killing him with a far from accidental stab to the heart. He then applied the solvent to the fake Immulate in the MaxSec case, completely changing its surface form as it dissolved, so he could simply pour it out without triggering the detector field which had been sensitized only to the fake Immulate's *solid* form. Then he went downstairs to place the line tap - the ceiling panel was only a few steps from the bottom of his stairs. He wanted to keep tabs on the investigation for the first crucial days while it would have to be carried out on board, so he could adjust any details of his story to suit, no doubt.'

Then he edged along the side of the corridor until he could put a piece of tape over the door monitor camera. This made us think X entered the coupler module between cars A and B, possibly to dispose of or temporarily conceal the Immulate for later collection by an accomplice - setting up another false trail. At some earlier time of the day, Costermann had even

put a couple of scratches on the doorlock panel as he passed through to create the impression somebody had been tampering with it. The longer it seemed X was at work elsewhere the stronger Costermann's alibi became, since we would tie in his incapacitation with the time of Tralbet's death.'

Costermann stared back at her impassively.

'In fact Costermann nipped straight back upstairs to arrange himself artfully beside the empty MaxSec case and trigger the second gas capsule, which we were meant to find: genuinely knocking himself out and making it appear as though it had happened at the same time as Tralbet. Being gassed was a great alibi: no complicated description of the burglary to concoct and it even earns you sympathy.'

'Really,' said Costermann. 'And the supposed remains of the Imnulate?'

'Flushed down the toilet. Clarrie Sommers chanced to be up and about around the time this was going on - in fact you were lucky not to bump into her - and heard water running. It's such an innocent sound. But eventually it got me thinking what you run water for. To flush something away among other things.'

'And Merch?' Lucas Sommers asked.

'Yes. Bad luck there. Merch recognized the Imnulate fake the moment he saw it. He knew gems and he had artificial lenses in his eyes. Some sort of polarization effect gave it away I guess. He kept quiet at first not knowing quite what to make of it. But after the theft and murder he must have caught on to the deception and wanted paying to stay silent.' She looked Costermann in the eye again. 'I thought your health was a bit up and down once you'd got up from the effects of the gas. First bright and bravely resilient because you thought you'd got away with it, then shocked when you found you hadn't and knew you had to silence Merch.'

'You told us you thought you heard something in the corridor on the night of Merch's death and even opened your door to look out. That was to cover yourself, of course, in case somebody genuinely heard you going along to Merch's

compartment as you had arranged. Was he naive enough to turn his back on you, or did you employ another diversion? Either way, you used his business case to knock him out, probably intending to suffocate him once he was unconscious. But the one blow had been enough.'

'And where is your evidence for all this?' Costermann asked coolly. 'If I did what you say, which I totally deny, there is by your own account no proof.'

Bernice smiled grimly. 'Do you know how the plumbing on this train works? I didn't until last night. They don't just throw the waste water away, it's recycled. Solids or semi-solids - like your plastic goo residue from the fake Immulate - settle out in tanks under each car. They're normally sucked out at stops along the way to help make fertilizer. Thai should have happened at Roaring Canyon, but because of the panic there it didn't, so the evidence is still on board. When we get to Thule the police are going to have the contents of the tank analysed down to one part in ten billion. And I think there'll be enough of your plastic to show up, don't you? And then they'll match it with something your company produces, and that will be that!'

Tyne had been looking at Costermann for long minutes in silence, the colour draining from his face. Now he spoke out.

'I believe it. You're evil! Ail Lil and I wanted out of life was our cut - but you had to have everything! She's dead because of you!' His hands were clenched as though he wished they were round Costermann's throat and he started to rise from his chair. Costermann, sensing the naked hatred in his words, actually showed a flicker of fear for the first time and shrank away. Lucas Sommers unexpectedly reached out a restraining hand to Tyne.

'No. He's not worth it,' he said simply.

'I want to see him really suffer for this!' Tyne said simply, slumping back into his chair again.

'He will,' Bernice assured him. She glanced at the numerals on the ETA display and let out her breath with a sigh. 'Still eleven minutes to go. I promised I'd sort this thing out before we reached Thule.'

But Costermann had recovered his composure, and now he straightened up. 'Well, if that's all, I shall be returning to my compartment to finish packing.'

His brazen effrontery astounded Bernice. 'Don't you understand, I'm arresting you'

'On what evidence?' Costermann cut in quickly. 'You admit yourself you have none. Suppose the police do find some sort of plastic waste in the sewage tanks? Can anybody prove I had anything to do with it?'

'There'll be traces in the sink or lavatory pan in your stateroom. They haven't been cleaned since that night.'

'Even if there are. what of it?' Costermann replied imperturbably. 'I was unconscious, gassed, and that is an indisputable fact. How can I be held responsible for what the thief did in my room during that time? Perhaps he, or she, did dispose of something in the way you suggest, but it is hardly my responsibility. All you have are suspicions and conjecture and that is not enough.'

Their eyes locked fleetingly, and in that moment Bernice knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Costermann was guilty: a cold, calculating killer. And he knew she knew. But no hint of that silent admission disturbed his quiet arrogance. With the merest suggestion of a smile turning up the corners of his mouth, he added: 'As I recall mentioning to you when we first met, Professor, I can afford to employ very good lawyers.'

And he rose calmly from his chair. Deek moved to stop him, but Klemp shook his head, and Deek reluctantly stepped aside. Costermann smiled coldly.

'That's very wise of you, Klemp. Your normal crude tactics won't work here. The proper authorities may question me when we reach Thule, with my legal representative present, and I shall be pleased to co-operate fully to help resolve this sorry business. But until then you will all kindly stay out of my way.'

And he strode out of the lounge and started down the stairs.

'He can't get away with it!' Tyne said.

‘He might,’ Klemp growled. ‘I know about lawyers.’

‘May Drell forgive him, but that man is evil!’ said Ellyn Verson.

‘Now do you see what he’s capable of!’ Lucas Sommers spat out.

‘He was just using us... all of us!’ said Denn Lankril, claspings Clarris’s hand.

Clarris, her face a mask of anguish, said huskily, ‘It’s not fair! We know he did it!’

Bernice suddenly felt very tired and sank into a spare chair, shaking her head wearily. ‘He’s right: knowing’s not enough. I thought he’d crack and admit it. But we’ve got to prove it. Maybe the police will come up with something

‘No,’ said Jordan Tyne, curiously softly.

Even as they turned to him he rose from his chair and started after Costermann.

‘Don’t do anything stupid!’ Bernice called, but he took no notice. She sprang to her feet and ran after him.

As Bernice reached the bottom of the stairs the dining-car doors were just sliding shut, with Tyne squeezing his slender frame through them. Before she could follow him they closed in her face and Tyne was alone in the coupler module with Costermann, who, with the automatic circuit damaged, was just reaching out to press the manual control of the A car doors opposite.

She saw Tyne step up to Costermann and say something, but the words were muffled by the intervening panels. She stabbed at the door control button even as Costermann turned about and, with a contemptuous expression on his face, pushed Tyne violently away from him. Tyne fell backwards, his elbow striking the blackened inner manual door control panel. There was a soft splutter of sparks from within the door frame. Bernice punched the button on her side again but nothing happened.

She was aware of the others coming down the stairs behind her and beginning to form a crowd at her back. Bassit was calling for Yorland over his lapel intercom.

‘I haven’t anything to lose...’ Tyne’s shouted words came faintly to them. ‘...tell them what you’re really like... some of it’ll stick.’

Finally Costermann’s calm deserted him. He grasped the smaller man by the lapels, spun him round and threw him backwards.

Tyne tore through the plastic sheet and warning tapes strung across the empty frame of the inner door and thudded into the patched and blackened outer hatch. Dazed but still determined he started forward, shouting out his hatred. Costermann knocked aside his hands and pushed him backwards again.

‘...you dare to threaten me... little man...’ Bernice heard him yell.

Yorland pushed his way through the crowd and stabbed at the door button. Getting no response he pulled a powerdriver from his pocket and attacked the control panel.

Tyne was slammed backwards for the third time. The door shivered at his back and metal groaned. A strip of temporary rubber sealant came free and a dark line appeared between the door and the frame. The gaping seam acted like a scoop, channelling sub-zero air into the coupler module at a hundred kph and condensing into a cloud of swirling white vapour.

A warning alarm sounded.

Costermann reeled backwards, the shock of the icy blast causing an involuntary indrawing of breath, triggering the coughing reflex which sucked more of the stinging freezing air into his lungs. Blinded and gasping, he clawed at the control button beside the far door.

The emergency breaks came on and the *Express* began to slow.

Tyne stumbled away from the leaking door and fell to his knees. His face and hands suddenly appeared pressed against the plastiglass door panel. His skin was blue and his eyes clenched shut, the tears streaming from them already freezing on his cheeks. He scrabbled at the glass for a moment then reeled backwards.

The broken outer coupler door flapped in the wind then tore free, leaving a black rectangle open on to the polar night. The interior of the module filled with a swirling cloud of condensation, enveloping both Tyne and Costermann. Sparks flashed on the control panel under Yorland's hands and the inner doors opened, but the second pair remained stubbornly closed.

'Get him out of there!' Klemp commanded. Brandon and Deek shouldered their way forward, dug their fingers between the gaskets where the door halves butted together and heaved. A motor whined, fighting their efforts. Denn Lankril joined them, adding his weight to their efforts. Slowly the doors parted. Freezing choking air billowed inward from the coupler module and into the dining car, condensing instantly into more blinding fog. Bernice dropped to her hands and knees, screwed up her eyes to mere slits, clamped her lips tight and groped forward. The cold pressed in on her like a vice.

For a second she saw two ghostly figures in the fog: both white with frost crystals, hands outstretched and clawing blindly, eyes frozen shut. They clashed and struggled feebly with the last of their strength. There was a final convulsion and one pitched backwards and vanished from her sight, while the other sank to his knees. Then Bernice had to shut her own eyes against the stinging air and could only grope forward sightlessly. Her fingers found a motionless outstretched arm, grasped it and hauled. From the carriage other hands grabbed her in turn and pulled, and she and her burden were jerked backwards into the warmth of the dining car.

The doors slammed closed behind them.

She staggered to her feet, wiping her stinging eyes clear. Lankril, Brandon and Deek were doubled over, coughing and clasping their frozen fingers under their armpits. Through the door glass she saw the air in the coupler module clear almost magically as the last of the vapour was frozen out of it.

Only then did she realize the module was empty.

The *Express* came to a halt.



Tyne lay coughing and shivering on the floor beside her. Ellyn Verson was laying her husband's jacket over him while Bassit called for Pell to attend, warning him to put on an environment suit to cross the damaged module.

Through streaming eyes Bernice looked into the others' faces. A moment of silent understanding passed between them. Unhurriedly, they moved over to the dining-car windows and peered out.

A little way back down the track and several metres below them, Costermann's contorted body was sprawled motionless on the ice.

Bernice thought of his ostentatious cliffside terrace defying the elements of Thunder Canyon, and said quietly, 'So Tempest got its revenge in the end.'

She realized a steady illumination was raising a sparkle on the ice and casting long faint shadows, and turned to look the other way. The warm welcoming lights of Thule dome blazed in the night less than a kilometre away.

Twenty minutes later the *Polar Express* finally entered the terminus.

# EPILOGUE

## From the diary of Professor Bernice Summerfield

The last two weeks have mostly involved making endless statements to the police, giving evidence to multiple inquests, and avoiding reporters as far as possible.

Police scientists found traces of a compound in the waste tanks of Car A which matched the formulae of a very hard clear plastic that Integrated Polymers produced. In view of this evidence, and with Costermann dead, his lawyers decided to preserve the reputation of his various companies instead of his good name. Pretty ironic after what he'd told me back on his balcony in Carlsbad. They didn't contest the finding of the inquests, and out-of-court settlements were made to Ferlane, relatives of those who had lost their lives on the *Express* and TGR itself.

A verdict of death by misadventure was passed on Costermann's own demise; the coroner accepting that Tyne was not responsible for Costermann's fatal fall from the train. I decided not to mention what I'd seen in the coupler module in that second before I had to shut my eyes against the freezing air Tyne's desperate shove that sent Costermann through the outer door to take that final step into the night without end. After all, in the circumstances I might easily have been mistaken. If any of the others saw the same thing they haven't mentioned it either, so I suppose I must have been.

For planning the theft of the Imnulate, Tyne received a three-year sentence, suspended in consideration of his subsequent conduct. I think that was fair.

Garv Ferlane regained consciousness after a week. His memories of his time on the train are patchy. He seems to remember me in a vague sort of way, but I can tell he's no

longer the same keen-eyed man I first met. Something's missing. The doctors admit privately that he's unlikely ever to fully recover. I'll always wonder what might have been when there was no longer any need for reserve between us.

Probably nothing. Maybe.

Nothing further of significance has yet been found about Smith, Wilver or any other member of their organization. After the discovery of a tuned jamming device on the line feeds from the Sky station sensor array, they were tentatively linked with the mysterious death of Senior Technical Supervisor Owen Rosen. He was killed on the day of the hijack by a contact poison, traces of which were found on the remains of a small bundle of note slips in his quarters, which had also been laced with micro-encapsulated acid. Beside these were the similarly acid-eaten remains of a credit transfer card, which later examination revealed was a forgery.

A spokesperson for the Kedd-Drell has denied all knowledge or involvement with Smith or his associates.

The police searched Costermann's house in Carlsbad and found a concealed panel in his desk which might have been used to substitute the fake Immulate. The genuine article is still missing and it looks like Costermann took the secret of its new hiding place to his grave.

Frankly I hope they never find it.

Eventually, blushing modestly with an official commendation and the thanks of both the government and TGR, I have been allowed to leave Tempest. Commissioner Hynds gave me a small package just before I boarded the shuttle, which I unwrapped on the way up to the Skystation.

In it was a silver Deputy's star.

*Extract ends*